

Using history to justify Confederation

History was frequently invoked in the Confederation debates by both pro-confederates and anti-confederates to justify their positions. All parties realized that they were at a pivotal juncture, when a new set of constitutional arrangements would alter the destinies of the new country's inhabitants, even though it was politically expedient for some to downplay the prospect of change. Speakers recognized that the American Civil War and the processes of state formation in Italy and Germany constituted part of the context, but in placing the Confederation process within a larger historical narrative, most politicians did not delve very far into the past. There might have been allusions to Shakespeare and the Bible, but members generally focused on how recent concerns—the clergy reserves or political deadlock—provided a justification for Confederation. Apart from George Brown, who articulated the Confederation pact as a key historic moment, the legislative debates reflect an attitude that Confederation would come about in a sequential process responsive to circumstances.

HISTORY AS PROGRESS

Members of the Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly held a typically 19th-century view of history as the unfolding of progress. History would reveal whether the Confederation scheme was progressive or retrogressive, or whether it guaranteed connection with the British empire, its institutions, laws, and remembrances of the past. History would provide lessons for devising a union without the defects that had afflicted Canada East and Canada West, led the United States to civil war, and other countries to internecine conflict. For some, Confederation meant a natural step in the progressive development of the colonies, and its rejection pragmatically unwise and backward-looking. John A. Macdonald observed that although political dead-

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lock, anarchy, and lack of prosperity could be ended through the dissolution of the union between Upper and Lower Canada, leaving them as they were before 1841, that was a “retrograde step” with no supporters (19). George-Étienne Cartier remarked on how easily the colonies could secure national greatness through Confederation, contrasting the process with ancient times, when warriors struggled for years to add a single province to their territory. In modern times, he noted, nations were formed by the agglomeration of communities with similar interests and sympathies (28-29).

George Brown's appeal to history likely alienated a good proportion of Lower Canadian representation. Glancing back on the time that had passed since the provinces became by conquest part of the British empire, he claimed to be recalling the “olden times” to highlight how the descendants of the victors and the vanquished, as dif-

ferent in language, religion, civil law, and social habit as they were a century ago, were now trying, amicably, to find a remedy for constitutional evils and injustice complained of not by the vanquished but by the victors. Together with the people of four other colonies, he opined, they all avowed attachment to the British Crown, and were trying to determine how to extend the blessings of British institutions so that a great people with close and hearty connection to Great Britain could be established in North America. He doubted whether there was a parallel to be found in history. When the United States seceded from England, and for many years after, their population, trade, and commerce did not equal that of the Canadas (36-37).

A SCHEME WITH A HIGH PURPOSE

Brown elevated Confederation as a scheme filled with high purpose, unlike the “petty politics of the past.” Not to be realized in a lifetime, it set in motion governmental machinery that would one day gradually and efficiently extend from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The emergence of “a great and powerful people” in a land whose boundless forests would give way to smiling fields and thriving towns, forming one united government, under the British flag, extending from shore to shore, was for him, “an over-ruling Providence placed upon them” (38, 54). This providential mission involved carrying out the great duty of developing the colonies’ “teeming resources,” including the fur trade and the opening of the northwest territories—the latter a task he had been negotiating with the government in England. His familiarity with old northwestern lore (narratives of history and struggles for commercial dominance in the fur-bearing regions) told him that it should also have been a cherished project of Lower Canada, and a source of pride for French Canadians (46-47).

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Brown's utterances paralleled the Puritans' "errand into the wilderness," which later took shape as the American idea of manifest destiny. His view also reflected Canada's perceived role as the source of resources for the metropole, while pointing toward the nationalist-imperialist vision, articulated more strongly after Confederation, that Canada would ultimately take its destined role at the centre of the British empire (47-49).

History provided the politicians with more practical tools as well. The Confederation scheme was advanced as one that would resolve internal political difficulties, restore harmony between the Canadas, and maintain British institutions. Without it, Premier Étienne-Paschal Taché warned, the colonies would be forced into an American union either by violence or by "an inclined plane" carrying them there insensibly. Because the union between the two Canadas had failed to resolve differences, "the fairest portion of the country" had been ruined by three years of conflict and "barbarous acts" akin to those in the darkest ages. Legislation had been stymied as Lower Canada continually refused Upper Canada's demand for representation according to population because, since the union was a legislative one, a preponderance to one section would have placed the other at its mercy (1-3). David Reesor, the elected member of the Legislative Council for King's in Canada West, noted that with neither party able to rule, political adversity caused political desperation, with some calling the great constitutional change necessitated by the numerous political crises "a political millennium" (8-9). James Ferrier, life member of the Legislative Council from Montreal, observed that once the Seigneurial Question in Lower Canada and the Clergy Reserves in Canada West had been settled, with no great issues of public interest occupying attention, political warfare was destroying all political and moral principles within the legislature

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and beyond. People holding government offices were attacked by the Opposition or their papers, and visitors to the legislature heard tales of political crime, bribery, and corruption. This demoralizing influence was felt by every parliamentary member, especially at the polls (11). Statements such as these reveal that many members did not reach very far into the past to bolster their arguments.

After hearing concerns about the Confederation scheme, John Rose, member of the Legislative Assembly for Montreal Centre, suggested it would be better to examine its merits, forget the past, former differences and recriminations, and not revive old animosities. In the impending new era of national existence, it would be unsafe for anyone who did not change their opinions to guide a nation's affairs. "Such a man is like an old sign-post on a road that existed twenty years ago, but which no one could not pass over" (71). In this spirit, he recounted that when Lower Canada's English Protestants were a minority in the hands of the French Canadian population, they were accorded the right of separate education long before the union of the provinces. The liberality shown in the past, he believed, was a guarantee for the future.

LEARNING GLOBAL LESSONS

George Brown added a global dimension to the discussion, extolling the harmonious way in which "a people of two distinct races, with different languages and institutions, and sectional hostilities" were dealing with greater difficulties than had plunged other countries into civil war in order to achieve peace-

fully and satisfactorily what Holland and Belgium, after years of strife, were unable to accomplish; settle questions that Austria and Hungary, Denmark and Germany, Russia and Poland, could only crush by armed force; avoid the foreign intervention that deluged the sunny plains of Italy in blood; and settle issues hardly less momentous than those that led to civil war in the neighbouring republic (36).

The American Civil War loomed large in the debates. The history of the United States suggested an unworkable governmental structure. Though many pointed to the American constitution's defects, Macdonald called it a skilful work of human intelligence. Modelled on Great Britain's constitution, it was adapted to the circumstances of a new country in the only practical way then possible. Time and events had exposed the problem of making each state sovereign with all the powers incident to sovereignty, except those conferred upon the general government and Congress. As a corrective, Macdonald explained, the Confederation scheme made the general government stronger, giving it all the subjects of general interest, thereby making one people and one government, instead of five peoples and five governments tenuously connected (23-24). In the Legislative Council, Louis-Auguste Olivier, elected member for de Lanaudière, argued that the scheme was politically retrogressive because it gave too much power to the central government, especially since it had the power of the purse and control of armies. The adoption of Confederation would see the local governments

crushed by the general government, he warned (9-10).

Cartier believed that ongoing struggle in the United States augured trouble for the colonies because it was not clear if the war would end in the establishment of two confederacies or one. If Canada's five colonies did not come together under one general government as a British American confederation, they would be absorbed into an American one (28). D'Arcy McGee warned about the territorial acquisitiveness of the United States: "They coveted Florida, and seized it; they coveted Louisiana, and purchased it; they coveted Texas, and stole it; and they picked a quarrel with Mexico, which ended by their getting California." Sometimes they pretended to despise these colonies, "as prizes beneath their ambition," but Canada would not have a separate existence, he continued, had it not been for England's protection. The first—and ongoing—ambition of the American confederacy had been to acquire Canada, even when she had a handful of troops and her navy was just a squadron. With guns afloat by the thousands and troops in the hundreds of thousands, was she now to be stopped? he asked (56, 57).

Often regarded as the most articulate opponent of Confederation, Christopher Dunkin wanted to avoid raising the ghost of past animosities by arguing for

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another way to be found out of the political impasse (80). In discussions leading up to the union of the Canadas, he noted, no one spoke about a union of the provinces by Confederation or otherwise. "The child was still-born." Old issues and crises persisted until the last session of Parliament when George Brown moved for and obtained a committee on the subject of constitutional changes. "We have yet to see, in the first place, whether the thing is done, and then, if it is done, whether it succeeds," Dunkin remarked (83). In response, D'Arcy McGee (echoing Macbeth's soliloquy while contemplating the plan to assassinate King Duncan) interjected, "If 'twere done, 'twere well 'twere done quickly." "The Minister of Agriculture is too good a Shakespearian [*sic*]," Dunkin responded, "to need to be reminded that the thing to be done in that case was something very bad" (83). Later, Dunkin asked whether the past was so bad that, on pain of political annihilation and ruin, it was necessary to adopt the precise scheme being put forward. He favoured continuing with a legislative

union, which had worked for almost 25 years. Could they not stay as they were, nor yet go back nor forward in any way but through the Confederation scheme? Things were not so bad that they had to fear going back to a "bugbear past." They could not do that even if they wanted. "Things done cannot be undone," he said. "In a certain sense, whatever is past is irrevocable, and it is well it should be" (92-93).

A SERIES OF ACCIDENTS

Both sides used historical references in their arguments. From the perspective of 2016, the proponents' invocations of history seem better justified than the opponents'. Dunkin's warning about the irrevocability of the past, however, has certainly been tested in the 150 years since Confederation. More significant perhaps is that the speakers, Brown aside, did not cast Confederation as a foundational moment for Canada but, rather, a matter of exigency, an attitude perhaps best reflected in Cartier's comment: "It is said that the world was made by a series of accidents" (84). 🍁

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