

The Robert Harris group portrait

Editors' introduction: One of the most enduring images of Confederation is the Robert Harris group portrait of the Quebec constitutional conference of October 1864. Having agreed on a draft document, delegates then returned to their home colonies to debate the propositions. This collection of essays uses the debates in the legislature of the United Canadas as a starting point for reconsidering specific historical themes. This excerpt from a longer essay about the Fathers of Confederation explores the creation and reception of this iconic group portrait. The longer essay may be found at <http://gedmartin.net/martinalia-mainmenu-3/236-time-to-retire-canada-s-fathers-of-confederation>.

The founding, in 1880, of the Royal Canadian Academy of the Arts no doubt represented a landmark in recognition and encouragement of the visual arts in the Dominion. Unfortunately, it was not easy to advance its cultural agenda, especially the central aim of creating a National Gallery. A cramped room on Ottawa's Bank Street was designated as the Gallery's first home in May 1882, and it may be that the idea of acquiring a large picture of national import was attractive as a means of forcing the issue of a permanent location. In April 1883, the Academy's president, Lucius R. O'Brien, submitted a wordy memorandum to the government calling for artistic commemoration of "the meeting of the Conference at which the foundation was laid for the Confederation of the Provinces constituting the Dominion of Canada." O'Brien did not specify which conference he had in mind, and the project began as a tribute to the meeting in Charlottetown. However, wherever it happened, O'Brien argued that it was "an event of such importance in the annals of the country" that a monumental canvas was required to keep alive the memory of the participants. O'Brien added two further points. One was a hurry-up reminder that the delegates were already dying off. The other was that Robert Harris, "a Canadian artist of ability," had recently re-

BY GED MARTIN

Ged Martin is adjunct professor of history at National University of Ireland Galway and at the University of the Fraser Valley. He is the author of *John A. Macdonald: Canada's First Prime Minister* (Dundurn Press, 2013).

[T]he Academy's president, Lucius R. O'Brien, submitted a wordy memorandum to the government calling for artistic commemoration of "the meeting of the Conference . . ."

turned from Europe and was "fully competent to paint such a picture."¹

Sir John A. Macdonald's Cabinet was apparently uncertain about how to respond to O'Brien's plea. To refuse to support a Canadian artist in the commemoration of a Canadian national landmark would seem narrow and philistine. But to endorse a proposal that would necessarily feature current members of the government would equally appear self-serving. They were rescued from their dilemma by Liberal frontbencher Wilfrid Laurier, who raised the matter in the Commons on May 14, 1883. Laurier no doubt believed in what he was doing, but it is likely that embracing the issue was also convenient to him. First, it gave him the opportunity for a frank avowal that he had opposed Confederation at the time, while making a characteristically eloquent avowal of his subsequent conversion. Second, it enabled him to adopt the mantle of a supporter of Canadian culture, his words of praise for Harris being deftly

mingled with a tribute to the work of Quebec sculptor Louis Hébert. His comments suggest that he envisaged a work of art that would contribute to the portraiture in the hoped-for National Gallery. Perhaps above all, the implicit message of Laurier's intervention was that his sunny ways could get things done: the project, he estimated, would cost only \$3,000 to \$4,000.

Laurier was seconded by a prominent Conservative, the Ottawa Valley entrepreneur Alonzo Wright, who saw himself as a gentlemanly figure in politics. Wright specifically had the 1864 Quebec Conference in mind, praising its participants in grandiose terms as "animated by a lofty patriotism and a far-seeing statesmanship" in their design of the new nation. His wide-ranging tributes were slightly undermined by his accidental omission of Liberal hero George Brown, and both oratorical efforts were hampered by the notoriously poor acoustics of the House of Commons. New Brunswick's Peter Mitchell, who would appear in the memorial canvas, complained that he could not hear whatever was under discussion, and that members generally should "speak a little louder"; Laurier apologized that he was "suffering just now from an affection of the throat." Macdonald wound up the discussion, in full statesman mode, calling the exchanges "really one of those occasions in which the asperities of politics are forgotten": he even praised the contribution to the achievement of his long-time enemy George Brown, who was conveniently dead, and "the present premier of Ontario," who was inconveniently alive and not necessary to name. The prime minister deflected the potential objection that he would himself necessarily feature in the proposed picture: a jocular allusion to the cartoons of John Wilson Bengough enabled him to insist that "I can have no objection to have another artist try his hand upon myself." Harris had won his commission.

The debate, although relatively brief, had rung the changes of praise for (to quote O'Brien) "the distinguished statesmen who took part in the deliberations." "There were giants in those days," said Wright, while Laurier referred to "the event which gave birth to Confederation." But nobody mentioned the Fathers of Confederation. The phrase did not arise in connection with the Harris picture until April 1884, when former Liberal finance minister Richard Cartwright spotted the item in the estimates, and was apparently troubled by the thought that the politicians involved could be depicted for as little as \$100 a head. Cartwright, who had been out of the House the previous year, asked: "Who is to commemorate the Fathers of Confederation, and are they being done cheap?"

Sir Leonard Tilley assured him that Harris had the work in hand, and that no money had yet paid out.²

It is only fair to acknowledge that Harris's picture was a remarkable achievement. He had to construct an essentially imaginary scene, dominated by carefully contoured heads. Images of



Confederation! The Much-Fathered Youngster:
1886 cartoon by John Wilson Bengough.

some of the faces were difficult to track down. When Bernini was commissioned to produce a bust of Charles I, with the subject unseen, Van Dyck supplied three portraits of the king, full face, in profile, and at an angle. Photographers like William Notman, who assisted Harris, snapped their sitters

head-on, and the artist evidently had to work with the available material. Thus Adams G. Archibald, surely the only Canadian to have served as lieutenant governor of two provinces, appears to cold-shoulder his immediate neighbour, John A. Macdonald, as he stares directly at the viewer: no doubt, a solemn full-face photograph was the only source available. Harris set his scene in a lofty chamber in the old Quebec parliament buildings—which burned in 1883. This enabled him to use three high windows as the background light source: Harris enlarged the centre window, presumably to emphasize the background panorama of the St. Lawrence River. "The sight was one to stir the dullerest imagination and warm the coldest heart,"

wrote W.M. Whitelaw. The Canadians, Whitelaw suggested, would have felt the essential unity of their two provinces, while the Maritimers "must have been stirred ... watching the tide come in from the gulf."³ In reality, Canada's coalition Cabinet needed no such reminder,

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Photograph of 1884 Robert Harris painting.

while the Prince Edward Islanders and Newfoundlanders, whose provinces most closely felt the Gulf currents, would become the least enthusiastic participants in the project. These comments by Whitelaw, generally an objective as well as a careful scholar, illustrate how the Harris portrait became back-projected into the story of the Quebec Conference, until it would become difficult to disentangle the actual hard bargaining from the subsequent sentimentality. The more practical aspect of the Harris design was that the huge windows provided light sources, which made it possible to silhouette those secondary figures who were still active two decades after the event. Although the picture was 3.58 metres long by 1.55 metres high, the delegates occupied only the lower half of the canvas, giving the throng the appearance of a crowded corridor rather than a constitutional convention. Ostensibly, the participants were grouped around a long table, but there was not enough room to seat them all. To ensure the visibility of the major players on the far side of the table, only 7 of the 34 figures, all of them in profile, occupy the side nearest the viewer. Necessarily, the lesser participants had to stand around the fringes of the scene.

Harris himself called the commission “the government picture,” and there can be no doubt that his was a representation of 1864 seen through the political priorities of 1883. Although Harris did attempt to replicate the general seating plan of the meeting, so far as it was reported at the time, his canvas was in every sense a central Canadian picture. Around the middle section of the table, where the real decisions are being made, not one single delegate from the Atlantic region can be seen.⁴ The standing figure of Macdonald dominates the scene, as he expounds from a charter-like scroll. Leaning toward him is his French Canadian ally, George-Étienne Cartier, in the body language of nation-building partnership. Slightly farther

The two Newfoundland delegates, F.B.T. Carter and Ambrose Shea, stand awkwardly at the back, like two embarrassed tourists who have stumbled into an ethnic wedding.

away is Étienne-Paschal Taché, premier of the Great Coalition and hence president of the Conference, who had died in 1865: the imperatives of 1864 meant that he had to be depicted, the demands of 1883 ensured that he need not be emphatically central. In the foreground, the only figure permitted to obscure partially Macdonald is Hector-Louis Langevin, who had taken over Cartier’s role as Quebec lieutenant, and was one of the possible candidates to succeed Macdonald if the Old Man ever decided to step down. George Brown and Oliver Mowat are close by, in the vanguard if perhaps not entirely on the team. Alexander Galt merits his near-central location, both as the wizard behind the 1867 financial settlement and for his continuing prominence in public life. But the location of Alexander Campbell close to the heart of events reflected the fact that he had led the Conservative party in the Senate since 1867. He played only a minor role at Quebec, largely because his skills as a Tory lawyer replicated Macdonald’s own qualifications.

In flanking positions are Leonard Tilley of New Brunswick, comfortable and confident in his chair, and the characteristically imposing standing figure of Charles Tupper. Indeed, it is not wholly clear whether it is Tupper or Macdonald who addresses the meeting. To the left of Tilley, there is a rent-a-mob of miscellaneous Maritimers, with others straggling away to the right of Tupper. The two Newfoundland delegates, F.B.T. Carter and Ambrose Shea, stand awkwardly at the back, like two embarrassed tourists who have stumbled into an ethnic wedding. Two Maritimers still active in public life, Thomas Heath Havi-

land and Peter Mitchell—the New Brunswicker who had found it difficult to hear Laurier’s original proposal—are etched against windows, thus singling them out from the crowd. One of the oddest portrayals, at the extreme right of the canvas, is that of New Brunswick’s John Mercer Johnson, who leans forward attentively, in a manner that almost suggests he is gate-crashing the picture. His positioning understated his role in the 1860s. Attorney general of his province, Johnson had attended all three conferences, forming part of a small subcommittee in London that had worked with the British to draft the *British North America Act*. But he had died in 1868—Johnson’s lifestyle was not conducive to longevity—and did not merit a prominent place 15 years later: perhaps, too, Harris had encountered difficulty in locating a likeness, and hence had been forced to relegate him to the sidelines.

There are other levels of symbolism in the canvas—for instance, in those participants shown handling documentation. It is difficult to explain why Edward Palmer of Prince Edward Island is apparently reading a newspaper. Perhaps his body language suggests detachment, for Palmer did declare against the Quebec scheme. As he was still alive in 1883 and living in Charlottetown—where Harris began work on the painting—it can hardly be the case that the artist was constrained by only having access to a pensive profile. But another Islander, journalist Edward Whelan, and John Hamilton Gray of New Brunswick are both apparently taking notes: each would later publish a book about the movement for Confederation. D’Arcy McGee holds a pamphlet, perhaps one

of his inspirational speeches (although it seems a very small pamphlet for a McGee oration). Otherwise, Macdonald and Tupper grasp resolutions, while Tilley has inserted his fingers in a reference book, marking points for citation.

If, overall, the Harris painting must be regarded as an achievement, it is hard to acclaim it—artistically—as a success. It lacks the spontaneity, warmth, and wit of his other well-known group picture, *A Meeting of the School Trustees*, which followed in 1885.⁵ His Quebec Conference painting did not necessarily ensure

the success of the concept of the Fathers of Confederation, but rather formed part of its gradual percolation of public discourse. For instance, a Nova Scotian MP, J.A. Kirk, referred in April 1884 to “those gentlemen, who are called today the fathers of Confederation.” But when the canvas had its public exhibition, soon after in Montreal, it was simply called “Meeting of the Delegates of British North America,” with a subtext that spelled out the location and purpose. In 1891, J. Pennington Macpherson referred to the “noble picture ... of the ‘Fathers of Confederation’ ... which now adorns the vestibule of the Houses of Parliament at Ottawa”⁶—for the politicians had been too smart to fall for any manoeuvre that might entrap them into erecting a purpose-built National Gallery. Unfortunately, the painting was destroyed in the 1916 Parliament fire. Harris sold the preliminary cartoon to the government, thus partly compensating him for an official decision to refuse him royalties on reproductions. Complaining about Mackenzie King’s unilateral redefinition of Canada’s relationship with Britain at the Imperial Conference of 1926, acting Conservative leader Hugh Guthrie pointed out that at Quebec, “all the great parties of Canada were represented. Look at that famous picture The Fathers of Confederation if you want assurance on this point.”⁷ Harris’s group por-



Rex Woods painting, commissioned by Confederation Life insurance company in 1964 as a tribute to Harris, and to replace the original Harris painting, which had been destroyed by a fire in 1916.

trait had become not simply an imaginative tribute but a documentary source of the concept of the “Fathers of Confederation.”

In 1964, the insurance company Confederation Life commissioned the artist Rex Woods to produce a tribute to Harris and replace the picture lost in 1916. Woods added three Fathers of Confederation at the right-hand side of the canvas, even though they had not been present at Quebec. Their addition subverted the balance of the original group, a disruption that Woods sought to disguise by placing a cameo from a Harris self-portrait on the wall behind them. (Aged 15 at the time of the Quebec Conference, Harris was in fact living in Prince Edward Island while the Dominion was in gestation.) Despite its resemblance to a gigantic cigarette card, the Woods revival of the Harris icon no doubt succeeded as a nation-building symbol. The downside was some of the individual figures were now third-hand—copies of interpretations of photographs—and several of the individual figures, notably Taché and John Hamilton Gray of Prince Edward Island, appear as spiritless caricatures. Woods captured a moment of breathless destiny at the price of rendering a collection of mainly lifeless figures. One unfortunate inheritance from Harris was that the participants all have their backs to the giant windows, as if ignoring the

inspirational panorama of seemingly endless river that symbolized the real Canada. Equally, the casual observer would have no idea that most of these black-coated figures were in fact men in their forties, not so much handing down a constitution to posterity as designing a stage on which they proposed to act themselves. 🍁

NOTES

1. O’Brien’s memorandum was quoted by Wilfrid Laurier when he raised the matter in the House of Commons in May 1883: *House of Commons Debates*, May 14, 1883, 1171-74: http://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.debates_HOC0501_02/433?r=0&s=1 (accessed March 2, 2016). The following section draws upon this debate.
2. *House of Commons Debates*, April 3, 1884, 1309-10: http://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.debates_HOC0502_02/515?r=0&s=1 (accessed March 2, 2016).
3. W.M. Whitelaw, “Reconstructing the Quebec Conference” (June 1938) 19:2 *Canadian Historical Review* 123-37.
4. I have used the key to the portrait in *Quick Canadian Facts*, 23rd ed. (Toronto: Thorndyke Press, 1967), 13. As of November 2015, there seems to be no key to the portrait on the Internet, but each sitter can be identified by “hovering” over his image: Parliament of Canada, The House of Commons

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- Heritage Collection, http://www.parl.gc.ca/About/House/collections/fine_arts/historical/609-e.htm (accessed March 10, 2016).
5. Robert Harris, *A Meeting of the School Trustees*, 1885, National Gallery of Canada, <https://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=13043> (accessed March 10, 2016).
6. J.P. Macpherson, *Life of the Right Hon. Sir John A. Macdonald* (Saint John, NB: Earle Publishing House, 1891), vol. II, 288.
7. *House of Commons Debates*, December 13, 1926, 25: http://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.debates_HOC1601_01/27?r=0&s=1 (accessed March 2, 2016).

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