

## Review Article

### *Confederation*

If fear has been the most powerful motive force in our political life, understanding has usually prevented it from driving us along the most disastrous course. In the Canadian context the formula, *fear + understanding = compromise*, has invariably meant compromises of a peculiarly conservative and, historically speaking, short-lived kind. For a while it was assumed that the most important of these had to do with the "solution" of Responsible government devised in the 1840's: Canada's substitute for revolution. But now it would appear that the nature of the compromise of the 1860's, in which the profound dichotomy of Canadian life was to be constitutionally housed, is really of far greater significance. It took only twenty years to discover that responsible government had failed to solve the particular problems facing the Canadian people in the mid-nineteenth century. Will it have taken one hundred years to recognize that the political framework constructed by our "Fathers" in 1867 cannot adequately serve their families in the mid-twentieth century? This has undoubtedly become *the* most popular question in Canadian public life, the subject matter of our great debate. No other political issue at this moment seems so pertinent. And yet, how relevant is it? Dr. Waite's study of the Confederation movement a century ago\* comes at a period in our history when the need to analyse present domestic conflicts rationally and wisely is more necessary than ever. For without a fresh perspective our fears for Canadian unity will never be tempered with that understanding essential to produce a compromise acceptable to the majority of our peoples, a compromise which will permit us to face the traumas of the next century confidently at peace with ourselves.

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\**The Life and Times of Confederation, 1864-1867: Politics, Newspapers and the Union of British North America*. BY P. B. WAITE. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962. Pp. viii, 379. \$8.50.

As Dr. Waite states on the first page of his book, "Confederation was literally a national issue, the first and the greatest that British North America had to face" (3-4). But if the movement of 1864-7 was the first in which confederation became a "national" issue, the idea of a federal union and the political forces that emerged in support of it had had a distinguished if "sporadic" history. Beginning with the suggestion of such a union in 1839 by Lord Durham, the idea reappears ten years later in the British-American League resolutions and soon after, certainly by 1856-7, could be found on the lips and in the writing of several Canadian publicists and legislators. By 1858 it had found sufficient support to warrant inclusion in the Conservative programme. And even though reaction to that Party's proposals for federation in London and in the Maritimes proved negative, the idea that a solution to the political ills of the colonies could be found only through some form of union in British North America persisted into the 1860's. Failure to resolve the differences separating Canada East from Canada West, however, created the political instability of 1862-64 with its unrealistic attempts at coalition government and inevitable paralysis. Finally, on the first day of summer, 1864, a unique Coalition of Bleus, Conservatives, and Reformers was formed and when, on June 22, it was announced in the House, it was made clear that the chief purpose of this new ministry would be to attempt a general federation of British North America. It is at this stage in the Confederation movement's history that Professor Waite's story really begins.

The author traces the movement briefly to the famous coalition in June, 1864, follows it along the road to Charlottetown and thence to Quebec. From there he returns with the delegates to their respective locales and from the vantage point of each colony and province he presents the public, and private, debate on the case for federal union until the Fenian Invasions and the final struggles that led to the royal proclamation of July 1, 1867. The story has been told before: in the recent past Canadian historians have examined Confederation on the average of once each decade. But the studies, for example, by Groulx (1918), Trotter (1924), and Whitelaw (1934), tend to deal with the movement in terms of the political and economic deals that had of necessity to be made within and between the provinces and in part as a consequence of commercial and industrial policies in the United States and Great Britain. The work of Creighton (1939, 1952) and Careless (1959-) has extended our knowledge of these years while deepening our appreciation of the men who were in the forefront of the struggle for federation. Waite has tried to do more. For him, the history of the movement toward Confederation lies in many sources: private correspondence, diplomatic dispatches, colonial debates, etc. It is his contention, however, that "Confederation was a great *public* [reviewer's italics] issue . . . [which] fired the imagination of many men, editors not least, as newspapers from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island bear witness" (3). He has, as this statement and the title of his book attest, attempted in fact to add a social dimension to the individual and constitutional-politico-economic ones we have already. He has chosen to rely upon newspapers rather than dispatches, upon editorials rather than *Debates*, upon publicists rather than politicians

to explain the process by which out of the chaos of factional strife in British North America a united and free and plural society was born.

Dr. Waite's endeavour to direct our attention to the popular side of the confederation movement is a worthy and useful one. In one respect at least he enjoyed a certain advantage over his predecessors: the scholarly works already published and the printed monographs of students made it possible for him to be more exclusive in his choice of materials and issues and to synthesize and compress where others were bound to be comprehensive in their treatment and expansive in their evidence. He was fortunate, too, in being able to draw upon expertise in regional history which until recently was not available. And he was further blessed with the most knowledgeable and sophisticated teachers in his field of interest. Thus he could, for example, confidently telescope the background of his story into three short introductory chapters and use the newspapers of the time to speak the familiar narrative of these years as well as to tell their own story. The result is a most welcome piece of original scholarship, as lively and as informative as the author's newspaper sources.

Confederation, we are told, was

imposed upon British North America by the collective power of Canada and the Colonial Office. It was a resolution of Canadian difficulties, the sovereign remedy for the ills that had beset the province for ten years. But in the Maritimes Confederation did not solve old issues, it raised new ones. Adverse economic conditions may have made Confederation acceptable; the poverty of Newfoundland was a powerful argument for union; the same was true in British Columbia; the land question in Prince Edward Island may have influenced the Islanders; The Intercolonial Railway was an essential condition for New Brunswick. But it must also be said that New Brunswick was pushed into Union, Nova Scotia was dragooned into it, and Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island were subjected to all the pressure that could be brought to bear—short of force—and still refused (4-5).

In the end, however, it was "successfully" imposed. "Confederation was a cause that succeeded." Why? How? Dr. Waite skillfully weaves the complex pattern of fears and hopes that characterized the movement. He omits little. Less is overlooked. We are witness to the least as well as to the most significant of the forces driving the colonies to a general form of union, and we watch and can identify ourselves with the men who led and were led by them.

More than one-third of the book is devoted to the progress of the movement in the Atlantic region. Occasionally, as in the chapters concerned with Prince Edward Island and with Newfoundland, the story tends to drag and become repetitive, but on the whole the space given to the clash of opinion in this area is justified. Certainly, had the author chosen to digest the material pertaining to the area further, to condense it, and then to use it in its shortened form to discuss the problems on a regional basis, his analysis would have been not only less rewarding to the historian but also false in the impression left on the general reader. Indeed, as a Westerner, I am especially delighted to find an Upper Canad-

ian sensitive to the rich variety of opinion and people that has grown up outside of and independent of central Canada. It will be a salutary experience for the post-World-War II generation to be reminded that "the Maritimes" is not a homogeneous unit with a common tradition. There were considerable differences in the views held by each of the maritime colonies and there were, especially within the oldest of these, deep divisions of opinion. This division of opinion was usually well expressed in their press. The four colonies together supported more than eighty journals—Halifax itself, with a population of only 30,000, had eleven—and Dr. Waite, speaking through them, describes brilliantly the interplay of local and national forces and reveals the negative as well as the positive influence of the papers and their editors. But his treatment of the eastern colonies (Chapters XI-XIV) is perhaps less interesting as an example of the opposition of Howe and other English-speaking British Americans to confederation than it is in pointing up the role of external forces in the success of this grand enterprise.

Confederation would never have occurred in 1867 had it not been for the policies and decisions arrived at in Great Britain and the United States. The author may have found space for only some twenty pages to describe the relations of British North America with Great Britain (III) and with the United States (IV) and for another twenty to introduce the effects of the Fenian invasions (XV), but the import of these cannot be measured by these few pages. The significance of these external factors cannot be stressed too much. Waite's mastery of his discipline and subject allow him to marry the impact of these forces often to the precise and critical moment when they were to have the most far-reaching effect. The English position was simple. At the time that Waite's story begins, Great Britain was the supreme industrial power on earth. Free trade had therefore become her commercial maxim, and colonies that were neither sources of raw materials nor markets for her goods were hardly worth retaining. However, when as in British North America they might have to be defended against a hostile neighbour and indeed when the costs of defense against possible invasion from the United States were bound to be considerable at a period when England would have preferred not to complicate further her diplomatic relations with America, such a colony was nothing short of burdensome. But pragmatism did not lead the Colonial Office to desertion. On the contrary, much care was taken and skill applied to assist the confederation movement that so well suited the imperial power's purposes. When, on the one hand, in 1858, Cartier, Galt, and John Ross had sought England's blessing for the Conservative proposal of confederation, the Colonial Office saw that support at that time might destroy the process altogether and Bulwer Lytton refused their request; but, on the other, in Nova Scotia for example, Howe was snubbed and Cardwell, like the other Governors in the region, pressed the case for confederation for all it was worth. This kind of pressure was not always successful (e.g., in Newfoundland or Prince Edward Island), but the conscious and cautious efforts of the British Colonial Office were of immense importance in helping to determine the final outcome.

The United States position was more complicated. While Canadians enjoyed the

economic benefits that flowed indirectly from the Civil War, they were appalled by the fact that the war could have occurred. Once the war had ended, a hostile unemployed Northern army, aggressive Fenians, and a protectionist trade policy had to be faced by the scattered colonists in British America. What the English planned, the Americans achieved by mistake. Time and again, often precisely at the most critical moments in the history of the confederation movement, federation was saved by political, economic, or military threats emanating from the United States even when excursions across the borders did not actually occur. And when they did, only the restraining hand of the United States President forced the army's withdrawal and allowed the Canadian movement free use of anti-American sentiment without the responsibility of physically having to defeat American troops. Between them, Britain and the United States engendered a number of fears which fed the hungry confederation machine and influenced the very nature of the Act it produced: fears of invasion or of annexation, of U.S. institutions or British colonial pressures, of U.S. tariffs or British free trade policies, of independence, economic stagnation, etc., etc. Without these fears aroused by external forces, Brown, Macdonald, Cartier, Galt *et al* could never have manipulated the British American polity to the point where federation could be agreed upon. These forces from outside tended to temper the internal stresses and make co-operation for union easier.

Co-operation between Upper and Lower Canada was essential to the success of the federation movement. Once the deadlock had been broken by George Brown's initiative in agreeing to enter the Coalition of Bleus and Conservatives on the basis of their pursuing a policy of general federation, the only real question was whether the leaders of French Canada could carry their people with them. As Brown said in the greatest address of his life, "It is little sacrifice to me to accept this compromise. . . . But it is a great thing, a most bold and manly thing, for Sir Etienne Taché, and for the member for Montreal East (Mr. Cartier) to take up this question". Even after the principles and details had been worked out at Charlottetown and Quebec, the success of the movement was bound to be determined by Cartier's ability to carry Lower Canada with him. The Resolutions were as conservative a compromise as the combination of internal and external factors would permit if the underlying forces that had made the older Union workable were to be surmounted. Would Canada, however, agree?

"Great History", E. H. Carr tells us in his Trevelyan Lectures, "is written precisely when the historian's vision of the past is illuminated by insights into the problems of the present". In this sense Waite's chapter on Canada East (X) is the finest in the book. It may not seem so relevant as that on the federal principle (VIII) or so valuable as that which deals with newspapers and political life (I), but in many ways it combines the main issues and demands the fullest use of the author's considerable talents for analysis and synthesis. I shall not spoil the reader's joy in discovering it by trying to summarize it here. At a time when a shroud of mythology is slowly and carefully being knit around the issue of French-English relations, this chapter ought to be required reading for every politician

and publicist in the nation. It contains a superb statement of the facts of what is often referred to as the "pact". His use of the excellent newspapers at his command presents a picture of Lower Canadian opinion—English as well as French—that is matched nowhere else. Only in the light of a deep understanding of how French-speaking Canadians of 1865-7 entered confederation can we hope to approach an appreciation of the reasons why it seemed to Laurier to be dead in 1891, why it nearly perished during the cataclysms of 1917-19, why it was necessary to establish the Rowell-Sirois Commission in 1937 to examine its future, and why today we have another Royal Commission and another federal-provincial conference to examine the basic aspects of Confederation. Dr. Waite's volume offers the best introduction to such an understanding that I know.

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