

THE HALIFAX PRESS AND B. N. A. UNION 1856-1864

JOHN HEISLER*

THE achievement of responsible government in 1848 ended a period of bitter politico-religious controversy in the Nova Scotia press. Henceforth, the newspapers would have to expend their energies in advocating new causes like the one which forms the subject of this paper. It seems likely that a sense of British North American unity had never been wholly obscured. Men like Sir Guy Carleton, Chief Justices Smith and Sewell of Lower Canada, Hon. Richard John Uniacke and Mr. Joseph Howe of Nova Scotia and Lord Durham, to mention but a few who were interested in the field of practical politics, had at one time or another advocated some form of federation as a possible solution of British North American problems. In 1851 at the same time as Lieutenant-Governor Edmund Head of New Brunswick was drafting his memorandum on this subject for the use of his superiors in London, Mr. W. H. Merritt was proposing such union in the Canadian parliament. Three years later the Honorable J. W. Johnston brought the question of union before the Nova Scotia House of Assembly. Moreover, as is generally known, in 1857 the Nova Scotia Government charged its delegation that had gone to England with the express purpose of persuading the General Mining Association to relinquish its monopoly of all mineral rights in the province to bring the question of union before the Imperial Government, and the publication of the dispatches with respect to this matter brought the subject prominently before the public. Apparently some men believed that the time had arrived when practical measures should be taken.

However, our chief interest in this matter lies not in the practical actions of statesmen but rather in the editorial opinion on this subject as expressed by the Halifax newspapers. Of these the *Acadian Recorder* was one of the first and most persistent champions of inter-provincial consolidation. Upon considering that, despite sectional jealousies and party rivalries, the idea of some form of Confederation appeared to meet with considerable approval in all parts of the B. N. A. colonies, Mr. P. S. Hamilton, the *Recorder's* able and eloquent editor came to the conclusion in October 1856, that it was the duty of the press to instruct the masses with regard to this important subject. So far as the *Recorder* could see, no insuperable obstacle stood in the way of such a union. All the B. N. A. Colonies were subject to the

*Assistant Professor of History, Dalhousie University. The paper was read at a meeting of the Nova Scotia Historical Society.

same crown, were governed according to the same constitutional principles, enjoyed substantially the same laws. The newspaper believed that British Americans felt themselves to be a separate and distinct people occupying an inferior political rank, which they found to be particularly galling when they observed other young nations enjoying all the distinction and marks of respect that independence offered. The *Recorder* pointed out that as matters then stood, the B. N. A. Colonies were without a voice concerning their relations with foreign countries. They had no voice in the Imperial Government and, therefore, no means of influencing its acts. Provincial interests, according to the newspaper, were sacrificed when they conflicted with those of any class, party, or section of Great Britain. Nor was that all. What most annoyed the *Recorder* was what it termed "that unpatriotic and sordid section of the British Parliament who would without hesitation sacrifice the honor of the Empire to a farthing a pound on cotton." To preserve peace, continued the *Recorder*, that group would be quite prepared to surrender portions of B. N. A. territory to satisfy "the cravings of Yankee Jonathan's greedy maw."

The *Recorder* then proposed the question: would union remedy all this? The newspaper answered its own query by stating that in union there is strength. British statesmen could not treat a unified British North America as a political nonentity. But until the consummation of such a union, the *Recorder* urged that the provinces should work to possess some voice in regulating those changes in British commercial policy that affected them.

During a moment of keen political insight the *Recorder* envisaged an ultimate transference of political power from Europe to the New World. A farsighted Britain would realize, maintained this newspaper, that all her future important accessions of national strength and influence must come through and by her colonial offspring. Upon their strength and deeds would largely depend the survival of the Mother Country as a first class power, and with this transference of power the B. N. A. colonies would become the favored lands of the new world, for the United States, as seen by the *Recorder* in 1859, had proved a miserable failure.

While denying any desire to propagate the dogma of manifest destiny, the *Recorder* nonetheless pointed out that as a general rule the manifest destiny of nations was what they themselves determined to make it. The newspaper appealed to British Americans to start carving out their own national destiny rather than sit back and see what the political fates held in store for them. The *Recorder* urged vigorous action, which would bring

with it both the achievement of national splendor and the ultimate command of the New World. If such an idea appears to us to be just a little absurd, we must remember that Mr. Hamilton, when writing thus in 1859 had one eye cocked in the direction of a United States divided internally over the slavery issue and drifting into a civil war that all but destroyed the Union.

Once that civil war got underway the *Recorder* used it as offering the prime argument for B. N. A. Union. The newspaper believed in the imminent dissolution of the American Union, in which event the Northern Federation, deprived of the Mississippi, would, according to the *Recorder*, need to secure the free navigation of the St. Lawrence and this, coupled with an identity of material interests between the North and the B. N. A. Colonies, would compel the North to draw close to the British colonies. But, and on this point the *Recorder*, was quite emphatic, only a unified B. N. A. could realize fully the benefits accruing from such a situation. Moreover, there was always the possibility that following a dissolution of the American Union, the Yankee dwelling in the Northern Federation would cast covetous eyes in the direction of the B. N. A. Colonies. In which case, according to the *Recorder*, union offered the only effective antidote to piecemeal absorption by the United States.

The *Recorder* favored a general confederation of all the colonies as against the smaller regional scheme of maritime union. It was critical of what it termed "the short-sighted timidity characterizing some politicians" who, realizing that some form of colonial consolidation would take place, were determined "to confine it to the smallest possible space so that they may not find themselves in a field unpleasantly large for the play of their very limited abilities." The *Recorder* believed, moreover, that the difficulties attending maritime Union would be as formidable as those attending a political consolidation of all British North America. The rivalries existing between such evenly balanced partners as Nova Scotia and New Brunswick would result in continued friction. In opposing the larger scheme certain Halifax newspapers maintained that because of the large Canadian debt the projected union would entail an unfair burden upon the Lower Provinces. The *Recorder*, on the other hand, maintained that Canada was no more in debt than either Nova Scotia or New Brunswick. However, the summer of 1864 found the *Recorder* becoming favourably inclined toward the smaller regional scheme of maritime union inclined both Newfoundland

and Labrador as the first step towards the ultimate objective of B. N. A. union.

The threatened dissolution of the America Union influenced the *Recorder* to advocate a legislative union of the provinces instead of a federal one for, according to the newspaper, a federal union carried with it "the danger of a conflict arising between the government of the state and the federal government." Granting that legislative union would be the less objectionable of the two types, the *Recorder* never considered how it was to be attained if the union was to include Quebec.

Unlike the *Recorder*, the *Novascotian* was inclined to be cautious in expressing its views on the subject of British North American Union. It saw innumerable conflicting elements, such as provincial franchises and currencies, to be reconciled before anything constructive might be achieved. In December, 1860 this newspaper showed much concern over the size of the Canadian debt, which it considered to be a leading difficulty in the way of union. "How", asks the *Novascotian*, "is this debt to be borne by the different members of confederation?" Advocates of union at that time urged a uniform tariff for the raising of revenue for the federal government. According to the *Novascotian* this would mean that the expense attending the provincial government would have to be borne by direct taxation. Were the provinces, however, ready to introduce such a system of direct taxation? The newspaper believed that union would double Nova Scotia's financial burden, for the federal government would absorb all existing provincial revenue derived from the existing tariff and so leave each province to meet the expenses of its local legislature and all the cost of its local government by direct taxation or by a provincial excise. We find the *Novascotian* in December, 1860, pleading for a statesman who would show how union was to be achieved without doubling the current expenses of government. It also desired to be shown a plan of union whereby no section of the country would be subjected to an unequal and unjust share of the public debt as compared with other parts. On the question of a legislative or federal union the *Novascotian*, more realistic in this respect than the *Recorder*, held a legislative union to be clearly impossible. All in all, prior to 1863 the *Novascotian* believed that B.N.A. union would be attended with numerous benefits political and commercial, and the newspaper appealed for the presentation of a rational and feasible scheme not entailing such an amount of injury upon the Lower Provinces as would more than counter-balance the benefits which they would derive from it.

On the evening of July 26, 1863 the Canadian statesman Mr. D'Arcy McGee delivered an Address at Temperance Hall on the subject "The Intercolonial Railroad and Intercolonial Relations with reference to the future of British America." During the address the speaker proceeded to show some of the valuable benefits that would accrue from Confederation and to mention that events in the United States pointed to a necessity for a mutual agreement amongst the colonies. Both Hon. J. W. Johnston and Hon. Joseph Howe were present to hear Mr. McGee, and at the conclusion of his address the two Nova Scotia statesmen moved and seconded the vote of thanks. In doing so both expressed themselves in favor of a union of the Provinces into one political community, and Howe moved, probably by the mutual good feeling exhibited this occasion, went on to state that he was in favor of union either before or after the construction of the Intercolonial Railway, though in his opinion the road ought to be first built and union come after. In reporting Mr. McGee's address the *Novascotian* of July 27, 1863 hastened to add that it heartily concurred with the opinions expressed by the Canadian statesman.

Grave suspicion of the political motives of the United States caused the *Novascotian* of September 3, 1863 again to discuss the subject of B. N. A. union and to express the opinion that "the press and no small portion of the people of the U. S. were calculating on an armed interference with the British possessions as a matter of strategic and political expedience." "The Americans", the newspaper continued, "coerced by their own internal discords, have got together very large armies, and we anxiously watch the progress of events."

By the end of 1863, however, the *Novascotian* was veering away from confederation and leaning towards the smaller scheme of maritime union. The revulsion of feeling in the Halifax press following the abandonment of the I. C. R. project by the Canadian government in 1863 and the charges of bad faith on both sides largely accounted for this shift in editorial opinion.

Throughout the period 1856-1864 the *Morning Chronicle* was pressing for the construction of the Intercolonial Railway and was interested in the project of B. N. A. Union only in so far as it might further the railway scheme. The *Chronicle* reported at length Mr. Howe's speech delivered at the Niagara frontier on 18th September, 1862, in which the Nova Scotia statesman looked forward to the day when Canada and the Lower Provinces would be connected by rail and when a man would feel proud to be a

British American. The *Chronicle* also reported the Quebec conference held the following month at which delegates from Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick had studied the British government's offer of limited financial aid wherewith to build the Intercolonial. The Halifax newspaper maintained that the assembled delegates had also discussed the project of B. N. A. Union and had come to the conclusion that such a union should follow, but could not well precede, the construction of the railway. The news, in 1863, of Canada's abandonment of this project affected the *Chronicle* in the same manner as it did the *Novascotian*, and the end of the year found the *Chronicle* maintaining that the recent negotiations made the Maritimes realize that Canada did not want them as partners. At the same time the *Chronicle* insisted that Nova Scotia should strive to bring about quickly a legislative union of the Lower Provinces. Advocacy of this scheme is quite understandable. After all it involved only the undoing of the disruption of 1784.

September, 1860 found the *British Colonist* believing that B. N. A. Union was "fast" becoming the great question of the day and though "beset with difficulties" the project was "ripening for practical discussion." In November of the same year this newspaper heartily endorsed the views expressed by Dr. Tupper in a lecture delivered before the St. John Mechanics' Institute, in which the honorable doctor had emphasized the advantages possessed by the B. N. A. colonies and had also stressed that they should strive to attain a position of consideration and influence in the world, that responsible government had not proved that panacea for colonial political ills that its early supporters had sanguinely anticipated, and that union of the B. N. A. colonies would remove those disadvantages under which the colonies labored in respect to internal management of affairs and in relations with the Mother Country and the world. The months of May and August, 1862 found the *Colonist* critical of the Manchester school of politicians, then enjoying power in Great Britain, who were ready to cast the colonies off as useless and expensive appendages. At the same time this newspaper followed the lead of the *London Times* and began to fear for the safety of B. N. A., warning that "federal America is in a conquering mood." The problem of defence always loomed large in the eyes of the *Colonist*, and B. N. A. Union was urged as offering one solution to that problem. Like both the *Novascotian* and *Morning Chronicle* the *Colonist* was disillusioned by the breakdown of the scheme for constructing the Intercolonial, and its issue of November 19,

1863 contained an article advocating a legislative union of the Maritime Provinces.

The *Weekly Citizen* strongly championed the cause of Maritime union, maintaining that the smaller regional scheme was both desirable and practicable whereas the advantages of union with Canada were not so obvious or its practicability so certain. Let the Maritime provinces mind their own affairs and rebuff any honied overtures from Canada. According to the *Citizen* of June 4, 1864, Maritime union far from delaying the larger undertaking of bringing all British America under one government would tend rather to hasten the movement. A maritime union would enable the Lower Provinces acting as a unit to deal on equal terms with their larger and more powerful neighbour. At the same time a reduction in the number of governments in B. N. A. would simplify the negotiations preceding confederation. The *Citizen* further maintained that completion of the Intercolonial should precede confederation. Until there was easy and speedy communication between the Atlantic seaboard and the far west, union was practically impossible.

The more the *Citizen* surveyed Canadian politics during the early months of 1864 the less it liked what it saw. It viewed with especial disfavor the rise of George Brown to a prominent and ruling position in Canadian politics. On this point the *Citizen* stated that "so long as he (i.e. Brown) is in a position to influence the administration and at the same time adhere to his western predilections, so long will any effectual movement for more intimate political relations between Canada and the eastern colonies of British America be impossible." This point of view is understandable when we realize that the Upper Canada Grits were strongly opposed to the construction of an intercolonial railway.

To sum up. By 1864 the question of B. N. A. Union had not yet become a strong political issue between parties. Both Liberal and Conservative party organs favored the scheme in principle, realising that it was "pregnant with weal and woe to the people of British America." As to the difficulties involved in the achievement of such a project, the *Recorder* tended to minimize them while the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Novascotian* and the *Weekly Citizen* were inclined to become increasingly pessimistic. Largely through the bitter experiences of the United States in practising federalism, editorial opinion in the Halifax press favored a legislative as opposed to a federal union. Moreover, the American Civil War caused the Halifax press to devote considerable thought to

the problem of British American defense and a large section of the press came to regard union as offering a partial solution to that vexing problem. However, the breakdown in 1863 of the scheme for constructing the Intercolonial proved a great shock to the Halifax press and caused the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Novascotian* and the *British Colonist* to veer away from the project of confederation and to consider favorably the smaller regional scheme of maritime union.