

CONFEDERATION DEBATE

Alfred G. Bailey

In eighteen sixty-six on the floor of the House
Billy Needham said "Mr. Speaker . . ."
and the Union men knew what was coming.
Wary of words, drumming fingers on desks,
their faces went bleaker.

White-haired David Wark called them to action
for the Province's and the Empire's good;
admonished the visionless and the factional,
sounding the changes on obstructionism and rejection;
stultification and penury written in ledgers
with statistical precision; the timber shipments
that might last the century out—with prayers:
prayers and a question of hard cash,
a typical New Brunswick contingency.

Or anyone's contingency, for that matter.
They could not repeat forever identical processes
in a world that would not stand still.

Some said the timber rafts would soon be a
thing of the past:
and the great fleets of sail, the ships,
dolphin-strikers plunging, making way down
the Bay,

in a span of numbered years
would no longer be seen clearing the ports.
Grass and silence, the derelict warehouses,
empty and derelict.
They could listen to the voice of the wind.

But there was more than trade reports that
made men dream.

There were those like old David Wark
who would
live to be a hundred, and even Mitchell and Tilley,
men who many supposed were shy of the
far-fetched, the grandiose, the insubstantial,

who seemed to see something else, something beyond them
that even gave pause to the prophets
of the economically, financially,
and politically disastrous.

Even Billy Needham with his statistics was
ultimately unable to cope with it.

It grew somewhere deep down in the
magmal regions of men's souls.

It went beyond promises, inchoately glimpsed,
of prosperity, prestige, and the enticements
of power.

Perhaps it was partly a sense of the largeness
of things, of the land;

although they could not actually see
a gull flying over the Strait of Georgia,
another ocean, the roll of the Pacific,
the beaten smoke-stacks and the freight of China;
dimly beyond the Lakes, the summer prairie,
and Palliser's Triangle, someday to be
celebrated

by those trained to read
the meaning of landscapes.

Perhaps it was something that could not be
put into words

like a railway advertisement
of a sequence of magnificent vistas;
but a way for men to live in peace and
freedom,

with mutual forbearance,
speaking in half the languages of Europe
and Asia,

with rights grounded in law.

Whatever else it was it could have been all of
these things,

but there were not very many who could see this
in the session of eighteen sixty-six,
and not many the year after.