

# The Maritimes as a Strategic Point in North America

By A. R. M. LOWER

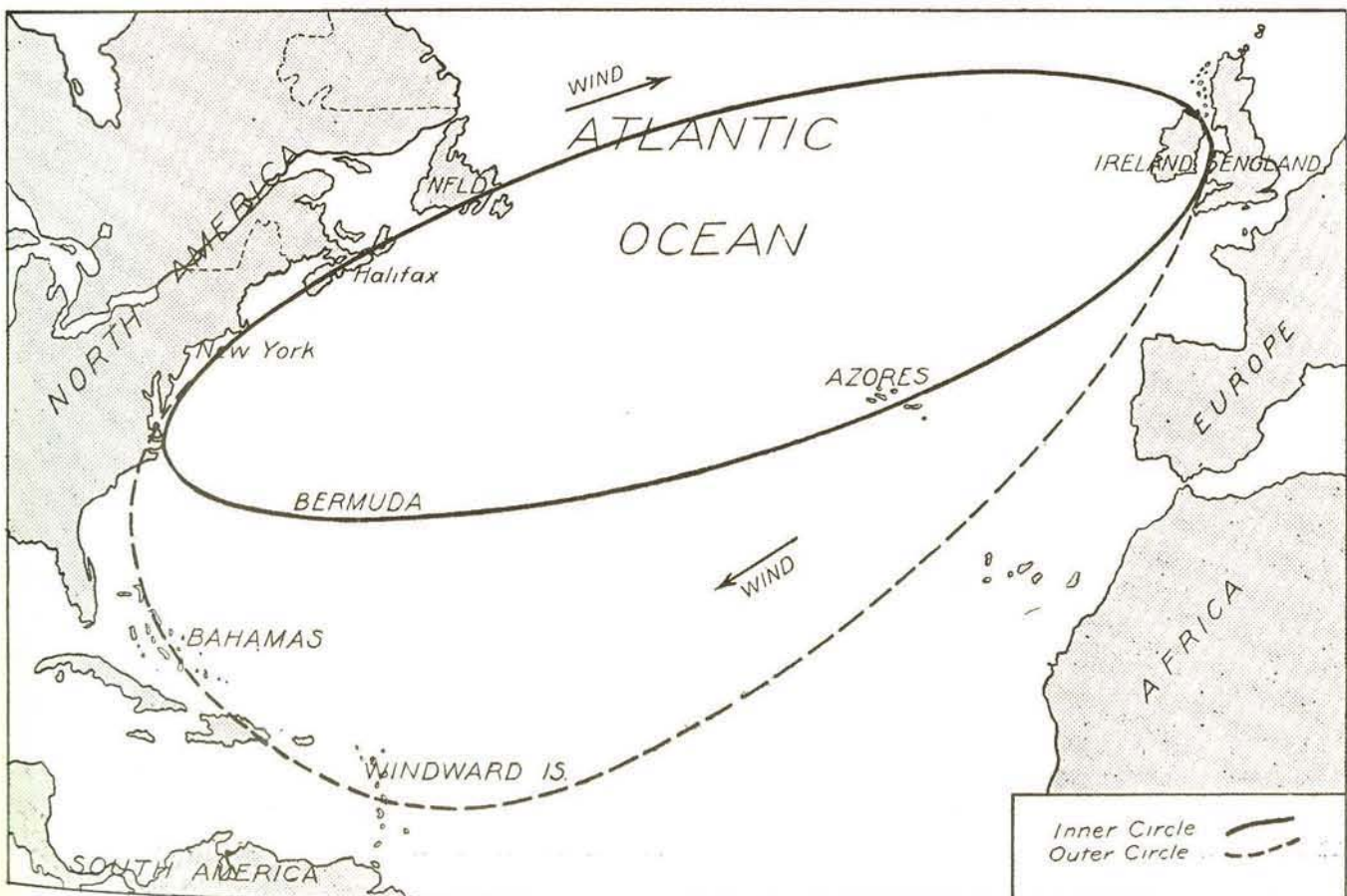
THE Ogdensburg agreement of last August has for Canada the widest implications, both political and military. In its possible effects it directs the mind of the historian back to the middle of the 18th century, when another great war for world power was going on and the Atlantic coast of North America was playing a role somewhat similar to that of today. Then as now the English-speaking world was in harmony with itself and its decisive connection with the sea was being demonstrated. Then the lands about the Gulf of St. Lawrence were the focus of the struggle: today, they may well prove the focus of a new age.

Much could be written on the varied aspects of the defence of this continent and of this Dominion. From the centre of the Pacific Ocean on through the

silences of the Arctic, out through Greenland, Iceland, and British Isles and further south, the eye of the strategist must range. He must think of Hawaii and he must think of the Azores, of the Aleutians and of Trinidad. He must remember what history tells him about the command of the sea. He must fit into his puzzle the new element of air power. But however wide his glance, it is to be questioned whether it can light on anything more significant than these lands about the Gulf and between it and the Atlantic, sites of some of the classic campaigns of history.

From the days of the discoveries down to the present, two paths have led from the old world to the new—the southern route towards the West Indies and the northern route towards Newfoundland and the mainland. Halifax and Bermuda are two points on the western arc of a naval circle or ellipse which in the old

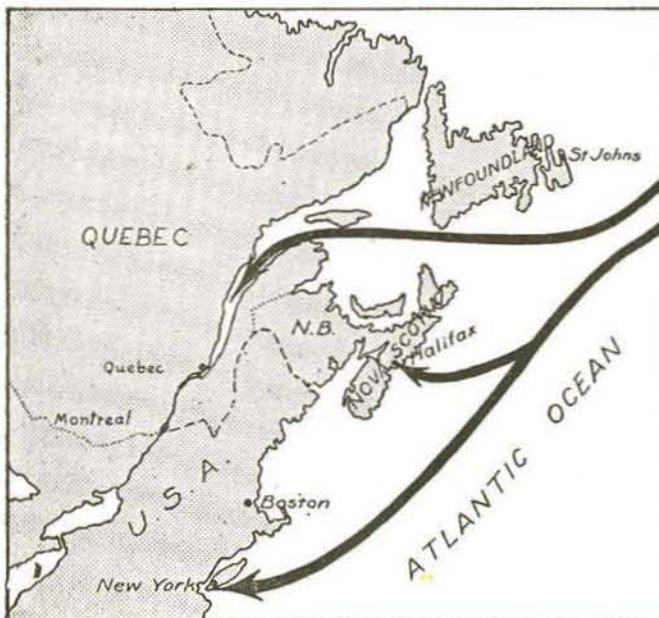
EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. A. R. M. Lower, the well known Canadian historian, is Professor of History at United College, Winnipeg. He has for many years stressed the importance of Canadian naval and air defence.



days ran round from England through them and on to New York (Map 1.) After the American Revolution Halifax and Bermuda remained as the broken ends of the arch. A still larger ellipse went through the Azores to the Windward Islands and thence north along the American coast and back to England. Along it a vessel could sail with fair winds nearly all the way.

Of these two routes the northern one in its turn divides in two, the approaches to the St. Lawrence and the Atlantic coast from Nova Scotia westward. Whatever the other variants in the picture, whether in peace or war, from one age to another these two geographical constants remain:—the long west-south-west sweep of the coast from Cape Breton to New York, and the extraordinary channel into the interior constituted by the Gulf and River St. Lawrence.<sup>1</sup> (Map 2)

In the series of wars between England and France for the mastery of the outer world, Canada was safely French until the problem of the St. Lawrence approaches was solved. Newfoundland was surrendered by France under the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 and the first great obstacle removed to an English advance



(MAP 2)

into the St. Lawrence. But the French countered with Louisbourg, almost neutralizing the English advantage, for from it they were still able to command

the approaches to the Gulf. Louisbourg standing near the point at which Gulf and Atlantic merge, represents the essential oneness of the two aspects of the strategy of the region. This comes out plainly in the English reply to Louisbourg, the building of Halifax in 1749: the Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia was being used to gain command of the entrance to the Gulf and thence to the continent. With the taking of Louisbourg in 1758, the way lay open to Quebec and the next year Saunders' and Wolfe's army did the rest.

In the War of the American Revolution, British naval power, based on the recent acquisitions, was adequate to preventing any threat to the St. Lawrence developing from seaward. Halifax therefore found its place as a base for operations, not to the east and the north but to the west and the south, against the Atlantic coast line of the thirteen colonies. Since the British held New York for most of the war, it was not an advanced but a supporting base.

The last series of wars with the French, in the course of which a second was fought with the Americans, saw the fundamental elements disposed in somewhat different fashion still. As long as the United States was neutral, Halifax could be used as an assembly point, as the natural point of convergence for supplies going over from the republic to Great Britain. In fact, except for the mechanical changes wrought by a hundred years, its role was exactly the same as during the last war. When, however, the war of 1812 began, the circumstances creating the point of convergence disappeared and the Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia to some extent altered its functions. Halifax was still, of course, the northern base for the British fleet in North American waters but the function of that fleet changed from commerce protection to the duties of a containing navy: in other words, it had to blockade the Atlantic coast of the United States. The remainder of the Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia and of the other Atlantic colonies fell into place as an area from which the enemy's

(1) For further consideration of this see the author's *Geographical Determinants in Canadian History in Canadian Essays*, Toronto, 1939.

trade and communications could be harassed by privateers.

The World War brought no new set of considerations to the surface: the approaches to the St. Lawrence were never threatened and Halifax ended the war as it began it, a point of convergence for convoys, an extremely convenient point of departure for the shipping thronging over to British ports. Even the entrance of the United States, this time as an ally, made no essential change in the picture, though for the time being it once more restored the symmetry of the 18th century Atlantic ellipse.

In this second German war, the situation does not remain unchanged; new factors have potentially, if not actually, emerged. Halifax at once slips into its historic role, convoys once more enter and leave its harbour, but now owing to the victories of the Germans in Europe, thought must go beyond this relatively simple function. As long as the British barricade across the Atlantic holds, the position will be much as before. If that were to break, we would at once be precipitated into a position something like that which obtained while France still held Canada, with the important difference that instead of the English seeking to penetrate up the St. Lawrence, it might be the Germans. Defence thinking therefore goes back to the French position before the surrender of Newfoundland, 1713. France lost Canada in 1760 because from 1713 on, she lost the approaches to the St. Lawrence. Canada today, the powerful Dominion, will not make that mistake a second time. Hence not to mention our efforts to maintain our first, or trans-Atlantic line of defence, our advanced bases, the British Isles and Iceland, we have underwritten the defences of Newfoundland. No doubt too the old Louisbourg position and the small islands lying just within the entrance to the Gulf, (Saint Paul Island, the Bird Rocks, Bryon Island and the Magdalens) are not being lost sight of. It may even prove wise—though further knowledge is needed—to complement the great air base at Botwood, Newfoundland, with a patrol station

on Sable Island, some 300 miles to the west-south-westward. Sable Island is 100 miles off the coast of Nova Scotia and a flying base on it would appear to give facilities for good observation of both the length of the Nova Scotia coast and the outer approaches to the Gulf.

Another new factor lies in the Canadian-American Defence Committee and in the British grant to the United States of a base in Newfoundland. For the first time since the Seven Years' War, the whole coast of the continent is under what may rapidly become a single direction, and this time there is not the key-hole through to the interior that the French in that war had in Cabot and Belle-Isle Straits. Even supposing that Germany somehow got command of the sea, it would surely prove difficult for that country to penetrate this unbroken front.

Not even superior airpower would enable her to do it, for if air power can dominate sea power in narrow waters—something not yet completely proved—it is of little avail when the scene of action is far from its bases, as a comparison of the present war in the Straits of Dover and the Mediterranean illustrates. The only way in which the Germans, or any trans-oceanic power, could get much advantage out of air power on this side of the water would be through seizing and holding a base. This base would have to be strongly held and of considerable area if it were going to be more than an annoyance—as Louisbourg once was.

If a sea campaign were ever to be fought from this side of the Atlantic, once again Halifax, while superficially altering its role, would really play the same part. It would be the main northern advanced base for American naval effort radiating out of New York, Boston and other northern ports. An American battle squadron lying in Halifax Harbour might then become a familiar sight. It is only slowly that Americans, even New Englanders, are realizing the full significance of "way down east" and discovering that "the east" does not end

with Maine but stretches out another 800 miles or so into the Atlantic, to terminate at St. Johns. But American thoughts have recently gone forward with a bound, as the large amount of space devoted to Canada in American newspapers indicates, and the logic of geography is slowly making itself heard.

In the three centuries that have elapsed since they first came into the path of history, the geographical elements of the North Atlantic coast and its funnel-like opening into the interior have moulded the events that have been superimposed upon them. Sometimes the set of human action has been in one direction, sometimes in another. In this ebb and flow it is easy to see the essential nature of the great port that for two centuries has stood out so prominently in every war. Halifax is a kind of pivot from which armed action may be swung in any direction. The British first swung it up across and into the Gulf against the French, then down across the routes to Boston and New York against the Americans. They bound it, as a principal centre of distribution, into the routes centering on their own islands. Today it is this again, and more; for potentially it is the centre of an arc lying both to east and west, not so much containing as excluding. Once more the Atlantic circle is complete, or virtually complete, leading from London

through Newfoundland and Nova Scotia to New York and southward back again through the Bermudas. Only the Azores provide a conspicuous gap. If complete this circle remains, that will have important consequences for mankind.

It is too early yet to speculate upon those consequences, but surely the events of the last few months justify some optimism. The Ogdensburg agreement, the fifty destroyers, the American naval bases on British territory, the Canadian defence program at last conceived in a spirit other than that of colonial subordination, all these portend a new kind of Anglo-Saxon world. It will be a world in which Canada, the keystone of the Atlantic arch, can play a great part if she manifests the qualities that should be hers. These qualities do not consist only in manufacturing supplies or even in forming armies: they do not consist merely in industry or martial courage. Important as these things are, statesmanship, wide views and moral courage in high places are more important. Without these our country may find itself in as uncomfortable a position as a small boy dragged along between two hurrying adults. On the other hand, with boldness, initiative and imagination, this Dominion, though small numerically, may, thanks to its position and the energy of its people, find a proud place in world affairs.

## New Defences of the New World

By CLARK FOREMAN

**E**NCOURAGING steps toward the military and economic defense of the new world have been taken in recent months. The growing realization by the people of the Americas that their

countries are inter-dependent is the fundamental part of this improvement. Throughout the hemisphere there has been a remarkable agreement on President Roosevelt's appeal of "all for one and one for all". Every American country is now inclined to accept the idea that self-defense is dependent upon hemisphere defense.

In the realm of military defense, the outstanding accomplishments began with

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. Clark Foreman is connected with the American Council on Public Affairs, Washington. Together with Joan Raushenbush he is co-author of a book *Total Defense* just published by Doubleday, Doran. (\$1.25). The Editor is further indebted to the publishers of *Life Magazine* for their permission to use on the cover of this issue ideas embodied in a map which appeared in one of their September numbers.