THE LARGE AND LOVELIER CANADA

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ABSTRACT

Canada grew from a country of nine hundred thousand square kilometres at birth to one of nine million a little more than a decade later. This paper surveys the Parliamentary Debates of the Confederation era, and in particular discussion surrounding the acquisition of the Northwest in the late 1860s and the Arctic in the late 1870s, to explore how Canadian politicians conceived of territorial expansion.

Before him stretches through immeasurable distance the large and lovelier Canada – the path of empire and the garden of the world.
- Charles Mair, writing in the Northwest, 1869.

Authors in recent decades have tended to misquote "large" as "larger," inadvertently denying Mair his point that, prior to expansion, Canada was not large.[1]

One of the trickiest things to do in teaching Canadian history is impress upon students simultaneously how old and young the nation is. It means on the other hand instilling an awareness of First Nations' experience of deep time in Northern North America and of Europeans' intermittent then growing interest in this land over the past millennium, and on the other hand conveying how critical the flood of decisions and happenstances of the more recent past was in creating the country we know. The sesquicentennial of Confederation can assist greatly with the latter task, offering an opportunity to show that the form and even existence of Canada was far from inevitable, but rather the product of immediate events and often short-term thinking in the Confederation era.

Nothing demonstrates this better than the remarkable growth of Canada's *physical* form in its first years: from a land of nine hundred thousand square kilometres at its birth to one of nine million little more than a decade later. In 1868, Canada purchased Rupert's Land and was given the North-Western Territory – an area slightly larger than Australia, this was a spectacular acquisition for a one-year old nation. Three years later, it integrated British Columbia and two years after

that, Prince Edward Island. In 1878, it received Britain's Arctic possessions, a gift of uncertain size that would turn out to be another million square kilometres. By the time Canada turned a teenager, its growth spurts had made it one of the largest nations in the world. Now, almost 150 years on, with Canada's .5% of humanity possessing 6.7% of the earth's land area and with our much of our affluence due to that discrepancy, it is worth teaching or reminding Canadians how that great expansion came about.

Doug Owram's *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West 1856-1900* is, to my mind, our best guide to expansion in this era, capturing how the Northwest came to be accepted as a site for agriculture, and so for immigration, and so for population growth, and so, ultimately, for Canada to become a global power.[2] But Owram focuses largely on the opinions of journalists, scientists, poets, and other writers, largely bypassing politicians' views. And politics, really; Confederation barely figures into the book. I recently read the 1867 to 1881 Debates of the House of Commons and of the Senate, now online, to see what federal politicians thought about territorial expansion in principle and in practice.[3] In particular, can their views be seen to evolve in the decade between the 1868 acquisition of the Northwest and the 1878 discussion about the Arctic? These were hardly average Canadians and their statements hardly off-the-cuff or unbiased, but their speeches may provide a more representative and politically relevant sampling of Canadian opinion than Owram's writers do.[4]

From the very first session of Parliament in fall 1867, the acquisition of the Northwest was a subject of debate. (However, it is interesting to learn that the term "expansion" and its variants were infrequently used, reserved more often for discussion of the circulation of currency or credit, or the economy more generally). Britain's desire to assist in the transfer of the Northwest was a catalyst, but so too was the United States' purchase of Alaska – that agreement having been signed within hours of Queen Victoria signing the BNA Act. New Brunswick politician Charles Fisher told of an American friend who had warned that "If you don't go up there [the Northwest] pretty soon, we will squat you out."[5]



Minister of Public Works William McDougall wondered that if the Americans were willing to pay "enormous sums for regions of ice, how much more would they give [the Hudson Bay Company] for this fertile tract?" [6] But the Macdonald government spoke confidently of being able to beat the American rivals at their own game, by adopting their policy of territorial expansion.[7]

So little was known about the Northwest that advocates of expansion tended to focus not on resources, but strictly on area: a bigger Canada would be a stronger Canada. Comparisons to other nations, and especially Russia, were common. "The moral power we would acquire by this acquisition of territory would be something very great," one member stated. "We would have territory half the size of Russia, and thirty times the size of England, Scotland and Ireland put together." [8] The Opposition ridiculed expansion for much the same reason. Nova Scotian Joseph Howe compared Canada to "a long fellow, seven feet high, narrow-chested, and ill-jointed [...] that if he were to take him in hand he could pitch over his shoulder in half a minute. [...] Did anyone ever hear of any country in the world, such as Canada, with a territory so vast, and a population so scanty, proposing to purchase extension?" [9] The opposition repeatedly derided the Northwest in these early years as "sterile," "infertile," "barren," "desert," and "wasteland." Surprisingly, one word that we might expect to see invoked – "wilderness" – was instead saved mostly to describe the largely unsettled hinterland of New Brunswick through which Canada was obliged to complete the Intercolonial Railway. This wild land within a settled province was, oxymoronically, comprehensible "wilderness." By comparison, the land of the Northwest was largely unknown.[10]

Canadian members could debate acquisition of the Northwest, but Great Britain's desire for the transfer and its assistance in facilitating it ensured it would happen. The 1868 agreement allowed the Hudson Bay Company to retain 5% of the region within what explorer Henry Hind a decade earlier had dubbed the "fertile belt." But for unknown reason the 1870 Order in Council that officially sanctioned the transfer redefined the belt, extending it all the way to the American border. In terms of perception, this meant that the entire Prairie West could be deemed "fertile." But in practical terms, it meant the Company retained much more land – approximately five million acres.[11] The Northwest was an abstraction to such a degree that no one in the Canadian Parliament noted the change.

With the transfer a done deal, there was little for the opposition to oppose, so it was stuck arguing lamely that Canada still did not know what it had acquired. Senator Jonathan McCully exemplified the Liberal position in declaring, "There was no precedent could be found in history for the transfer of so large a tract of territory by a Legislative Act, or by any cession made by one country to another, as that now to be ceded to this Dominion under the terms of these resolutions. [...] He did not know that he could add anything to what had been said, yet he felt it was a question which should occupy the attention of the House for days." [12]

For its part, the Macdonald government emphasized that the transfer justified Confederation. "It was a matter of glorification to us that in so short a time since we entered into Confederation, we had made such progress," said Georges-Etienne Cartier. "Who, under such circumstances, could say that this Confederation had not been successful?" Once B.C. and Newfoundland were admitted, "We might say we had completed our territorial organization." [13] But westward expansion would not turn out to be as tidy as first supposed. The Métis would resist Canadian sovereignty on the Red River, leading to the establishment of Manitoba as a province. Canada would commit to a transcontinental railroad to secure British Columbia's entry into Confederation. And the opening up of the West by surveying, settlement, and railway-building would make plain that large pockets of this land was as unsuitable for agriculture as Eastern Canadians had once supposed the whole region to be.

Yet even as the realities of expansion became manifest in the 1870s, Parliamentarians grew more positive about the land that had been acquired. For example, the use of "fertile belt" increased dramatically in the late 1870s and, more tellingly, the term became synonymous with all the Prairies or even the entire West. The Debates suggest a growing appreciation for Canada's vast hinterland – if only because there was no point in being pessimistic. The government had to be optimistic about it, since it was getting a syndicate to build a railway through it. The opposition had to

be optimistic about it, since it was arguing that the syndicate was getting too much good real estate as part of the deal. And, of course, the expansions of the past decade had not capsized the new nation, but rather seemed to have strengthened it. And fundamentally, all this land was now *Canada*. Nationalism dictated appreciation, and there was less upside in being critical.

This new attitude was evident in 1878, when Canada was asked if it wanted to acquire formally Britain's Arctic possessions. The discussion in Parliament about Northern expansion was far different than the one about Northwest expansion had been a decade earlier. Although the members knew even less about this territory and had even less confidence that it would be of any material benefit to the country, only one independent member spoke in any way against it. The entire debate in the House of Commons to acquire 1% of the world's land area took than six thousand words. Resolution came even swifter in the house of sober second thought. Handed the Commons' petition to Her Majesty that Britain transfer its Arctic lands to Canada, the senators moved, "To agree with the House of Commons by filling up the blank with 'Senate and.'" [14]

Hector-Louis Langevin had supported the Arctic's acquisition In the House of Commons by saying, "The future greatness of this Dominion, and its position on the continent, required that from the boundary line of the United States up to the North Pole should be Canadian Territory. […] It was necessary to complete and extend our boundaries." [15] But no matter how much Canada accomplished in extending its dominion in its first decade, completing the process – in terms of both reality and perception – would take far longer. In terms of reality, Canada gradually colonized the territory with respect to state control and resource extraction, but Canadians' actual engagement with this land remained far more limited. We would not live in most of it: a Canadian population distribution map of 1921 – most settlement hugging the American border, with a northern rise into the Prairie provinces and a few pockets of south-central to central British Columbia, Quebec, and Ontario – is remarkably similar to one of today. And in terms of perception, we would only slowly come to think of all this land as ours. The now-ubiquitous phrases "sea to sea to sea" and "coast to coast to coast" do not seem to have entered the Canadian lexicon until the 1960s.[16]

To self-plagiarize one of my better lines: Beaver and Bieber notwithstanding, Canada is best known for being big.[17] The passage of time only makes our country's size seem more and more natural, so it is worth reminding or teaching Canadians that this size is not a timeless entitlement, but rather a product of history. And it is a history in which the era of Confederation looms large.

NOTES

1 Charles Mair, "The North-West: The Great Riches of the Territory…" The Globe, 28 May 1869. See, for example, Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1970), 56.

2 Doug Owram, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West 1856-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

3 Historical Debates of the Parliament of Canada, http://parl.canadiana.ca.

4 The early post-Confederation debates contain refreshing honesty and an absence of kneejerk nationalism that would infect Parliament over time. One of the first meetings of the Senate, for example, ended with John Sewall Sanborn saying bluntly, "Some honourable members were very enthusiastic as to the resources of the Dominion, but he could not be blind to the fact that it had drawbacks as well. It had a drawback geographically in its shape and another of climate…" 11 November 1867, Senate *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 1st session, vol.1: 9.

5 Charles Fisher, 8 November 1867, House of Commons *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 1st session, vol.1: 8. Weymss Simpson similarly raised the threat of Canada being "squatted out" by the American. 16 April 1869, House of Commons *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 2nd session, vol.1: 5.

6 William McDougall, 6 December 1867, House of Commons *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 1st session, vol.1: 203.

7 John O'Connor, 11 December 1867, House of Commons *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 1st session, vol.1: 252. The feeling crossed the aisle: see Liberal Dr. Thomas Sutherland Parker, 5 December 1867, House of Commons Debates, 1st Parliament, 1st session, vol.1: 190. William Miller would go so far as saying Canada should follow the U.S. in developing a doctrine of manifest destiny, "a destiny, however, not of wrong or aggression, or of self-aggrandizement at the expense of their neighbours, but a juster and a nobler one." 3 April 1871, Senate *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 4th session: 185.

8 Robert Harrison, 5 December 1867, House of Commons *Debates*, 1st Parliament, Ist Session: vol.1: 194. Four years on, Senator Robert Dickey would note that while the Franco-Prussian War had been fought over "a mere strip of land on the left bank of the Rhine," Canada was "peacefully annexing a region nearly half the size of Europe," and, in integrating B.C., was about to annex territory the size of France. 3 April 1871, Senate *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 4th session, 195.

9 Howe, 6 December 1867, House of Commons *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 1st session, vol.1: 206. Howe would also compare Canada to a boy wearing man's shoes, and a frog inflating itself to the size of an ox. (4 December 1867, House of Commons *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 1st session, vol.1: 181) Future Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie would in 1870 mock the idea of little Manitoba getting its own government as something from Gulliver's Travels. 2 May 1870, House of Commons *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 3rd session, vol.1: 1306.

10 Likewise, in this period "frontier" was much more often used in reference to the U.S./Canada border in the East than to the Northwest, or, after its acquisition, to the US/Canada border there. A proposed route for the Intercolonial that ran closer to Maine was dubbed the "frontier" route.

11 Thanks to Bill Waiser for information on the 1870 Order in Council.

12 McCully, 31 May 1869, Senate *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 2nd session: 229.

13 Cartier, 28 May 1869, House of Commons *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 2nd session, vol.1: 485. At the conclusion of his speech, according to the *Debates*, "The gallant baronet resumed his seat amidst cheers, having spoken for an hour and a half."

14 3 May 1878, Senate *Debates*, 3rd Parliament, 5th session, vol.1: 903.

15 Langevin, 3 May 1878, House of Commons *Debates*, 3rd Parliament, 5th session, vol.2: 2391.

16 For example, the first recorded use of "sea to sea to sea" in Parliament was by Gene Rhéaume on 30 March 1965, House of Commons *Debates*, 26th Parliament, 2nd session, vol.12: 12968. By the 1990s, the phrase was being employed ten or so times per year. Rhéaume, it should be noted, represented the North West Territories. He also has the first recorded use of "coast to coast to coast."

17 Alan MacEachern, "A Little Essay on Big: Towards a History of Canada's Size," in "Big Country, Big Issues: Canada's Environment, Culture, and History," Nadine Klopfer and Christof Mauch, *eds*. *Rachel Carson Center Perspectives 2*011/4, http://www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/2011_4_big_country.pdf.