THE CHARLOTTETOWN
CONFERENCE

by

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THE CHARLOTTETOWN CONFERENCE

The Charlottetown Conference, like many events in history, was the result of precedents and accidents, the outcome of which few could have foreseen. That it produced Confederation was to many in the Maritime provinces the most surprising thing of all. The conference was held ostensibly to discuss the union of the three Maritime provinces, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. The substitution of Confederation for Maritime union was a brilliant stroke engineered by Canadians from the province of Canada, who would not have dreamt of going to such a conference had it not been for their own peculiar exigencies.

Union of the three Maritime provinces had been proposed on and off ever since Nova Scotia had been split up at the end of the eighteenth century. Prince Edward Island had been carved off in 1769. Under the impact of the Loyalists, two additional colonies, New Brunswick and Cape Breton, were established in 1784. Cape Breton was rejoined to Nova Scotia in 1820; and thirty years after that lieutenant-governors of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia had begun to suggest, largely on their own initiative, the reunion of the three colonies. By the 1860’s Maritime union, as it was called, had become official Colonial Office policy. The Duke of Newcastle, Colonial Secretary from 1859 to 1864, wanted it; Sir Edmund Head, John Manners-Sutton and Arthur Gordon, successively lieutenant-governors of New Brunswick, urged it; the Earl of Mulgrave, Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia, was persuaded of it: but all this imposing advocacy could not seem to breathe life into Maritime union. The three Maritime provinces all had responsible governments; governors could urge and persuade, but without acceptance by three cabinets and the legislatures to which they were responsible, Maritime union could never become a reality.

It was understandable why Maritime politicians were reluctant to accept Maritime union. For Maritime union was always understood to be the union of three provinces and three legislatures into one province and one legislature. To the outside observer it was an efficacious union that would remove pettifogging politicians and their perennial preoccupations with roads and bridges, and would elevate public concerns to more spacious dimensions; but in terms
of local political interests, the losses were considerable. Many politicians, and offices, would disappear in a new united province of "Acadia". And where would be the capital of "Acadia"? The province of Canada had spent ten years wrangling over the question of the capital. In the Maritime provinces the answer was no easier. New Brunswick politicians could hardly contemplate with sweet resignation the capital's being in Halifax: Prince Edward Islanders were determined that Charlottetown would remain the capital of something, if only of Prince Edward Island. The weary advocates of Maritime union in the Colonial Office in London and in the governors' residences in Fredericton and Halifax must have reflected that provinces were easy to create but difficult to get rid of. There they were, each of the three with the full apparatus of a two-chamber legislature, a responsible government, and yet with a combined population of not more than 700,000. It was ridiculous and it was expensive. The three provinces were almost like separate countries: each had its own stamps, coinage, customs duties. To go from New Brunswick to Nova Scotia was nearly like going to the United States. It was here that the slight public support for Maritime union rested. Abolition of intercolonial customs barriers seemed sensible, and this was the reason why some New Brunswickers, like Leonard Tilley, were persuaded of the value of a customs union. But even this argument did not seem to pull much weight. One must conclude that however rational Maritime union appeared to be, it found little support in the legislatures or among the electorate. There was an air of unreality about it. It would appear in after-dinner speeches, or in hopeful utterances from lieutenant-governors, but only a few far-sighted and vital men cared to bring it to real negotiations.

How it got to the conference table in September 1864 is a curious story. It begins with the Intercolonial railway. The Intercolonial railway was a more concrete question than Confederation or Maritime union, and it had created much more discussion, negotiation and trouble in the past than either of the two unions. For twenty years, from 1845 to 1864, the interrelations of Canada, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia had largely centred on the Intercolonial railway. And in 1864 it was still not built, or even under construction. The reason it was not was the monumental difficulty of getting four different governments to agree on terms and route. Each wanted different things for its money. A majority in New
Brunswick preferred the railway to run via the Saint John river valley; the British government insisted that it go via the eastern (also called the north) shore, along the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The province of Canada was divided. Canada East might accept the railway in order to have an all-British route to a winter port; Canada West preferred to see Canadian money spent—if at all—on opening up the North-west. The railway promised to be expensive; it was said it would not pay even for the ties it ran on; and not a few Canadians, East as well as West, had doubts about the expense of such a line. Nova Scotia could afford to be detached about routes; she wanted simply the railway, which would end at Halifax anyway. How it got there was not so important, save for a few delicate considerations in the Isthmus of Chignecto.

In 1862, owing largely to the Trent crisis of November-December 1861, the provinces of Canada, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, at a conference at Quebec, at last agreed on a division of the costs of the Intercolonial railway—in the proportion 5:3.5:3.5. This was taken to England in November 1862 by delegates from the three provinces, so that arrangements could be concluded with the Imperial government for a guaranteed loan. Her Majesty’s Government made stipulations that made the Canadian delegates acutely uncomfortable; and the Canadian government, precariously in power anyway, could not risk losing votes for the sake of a railway that failed to appeal to the whole western wing of its supporters. In the spring and summer of 1863 further negotiations were conducted between Halifax, Fredericton and Quebec on the Imperial requirements; Nova Scotia and New Brunswick passed acts implementing the arrangements: but the government of Canada did nothing. Sandfield Macdonald, the Premier of Canada (he was of the opposite political persuasion from John A. Macdonald) was personally willing to have the Intercolonial; he told Tilley of New Brunswick in 1863, “I declare to God, Tilley, if I thought by resigning my office we could get the Intercolonial railway, I would do it.” But Sandfield Macdonald’s willingness was not enough. A. A. Dorion, the Provincial Secretary, left the cabinet on the issue in September 1862, resigning his office in January 1863; and many of Sandfield Macdonald’s supporters were opposed to the Intercolonial on the terms offered. Dorion rejoined the government in May, and at last, in September 1863, the Sandfield Macdonald government revealed the disagreeable truth: the arrangements of 1862 would be
abandoned. Canada would now only consider a survey. To contribute to a survey with no real prospect of a railway was more than New Brunswick could accept with equanimity. Bitter recriminations burst forth from the New Brunswick government, and from newspapers both in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, against the perfidy of Canada.

It was in this mood that New Brunswick and Nova Scotia turned with rather more enthusiasm than usual to Maritime union. Spurned by Canada and smarting under the treatment, they were ready to talk about some counter-measure. "One set of laws, one Government, one tariff," wrote the Saint John Daily Evening Globe on November 4, 1863, "would produce interests in every way identical; identical interests would produce a unanimity of opinion and purposes among us, and this would make the United [Maritime] Provinces powerful. We could talk with some effect. Canada would not dare to treat us so basely as she has done."

But this state of mind did not seem to last long. Early in 1864 the Sandfield Macdonald government offered to pay for the whole survey itself. Sandford Fleming had been appointed as surveyor for Canada as early as August 1863; but at that time New Brunswick would not pay its share of the survey except upon the basis of a definite agreement about the railway. Now, in February 1864, the Canadian government offered the whole survey for nothing! Some reasons for this move can be adduced. Tupper in Nova Scotia continued privately to press the Sandfield Macdonald government for some positive action, and Tupper was aided by the managing director of the Grand Trunk Railway, C. J. Brydges, who was interested in building the Intercolonial railway. Hostile American attitudes evidenced in the New York press, and the more practical hostility of the American Senate—in threats to abrogate the bonding system—worried the Canadian cabinet. Might Canada be cut off from an outlet to the sea for six months a year? Canada would be, if Americans ended the right of transit for Canadian goods to and from Portland, Maine. So there was a disposition in Quebec to mend Intercolonial arrangements; and while there was some public surprise at the Canadian offer, the governments of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick accepted it with alacrity, and agreed to put all their facilities at the disposal of the surveyor. By March 1864, while it was still winter, Sandford Fleming was at work; shortly after March 10 he was snowshoeing with his party of twenty across the
ninety miles from Rimouski over the Gaspé ridge to the Matapedia valley and down to the Restigouche. Two weeks later he appeared spectacularly in Fredericton for dinner at the Lieutenant-Governor's, clad in a grey homespun suit and a red flannel shirt.

It was while these events were transpiring that the Nova Scotia and New Brunswick legislatures met for the session of 1864. It had been decided to put Maritime union before them. The initiative came from the Colonial Office, the persuasion from the lieutenant-governors (notably Arthur Gordon of New Brunswick) and the willingness from the two governments of the day, Tupper and the Conservatives in Nova Scotia, in power since May 1863, and Tilley and the "Liberals"* of New Brunswick, in power since 1856.

Nova Scotia was rather more favourable to Maritime union than New Brunswick, and the resolution asking for delegates to be appointed to a conference was first presented in the Nova Scotian legislature, on March 28, 1864. But the Canadian offer of the survey—already public knowledge for three weeks—had the effect of depriving Maritime union of nearly all the small momentum it had acquired. The desultory debate in the legislature was indicative; and some members of the House seemed even to prefer a British North American union to a Maritime one. The resolution passed the day it was introduced, without a dissenting voice; but the chill and listlessness of the debate boded ill for the future of the project.

It fared no better in New Brunswick, where it was introduced two weeks later. Tupper wrote hopefully to Tilley that he hoped the Maritime union resolution would pass in New Brunswick with the same unanimity exhibited in Nova Scotia; and the resolution did pass in New Brunswick without a division; but unanimity covered the lifelessness of the issue. Neither one of the leading daily newspapers in Saint John bothered to comment, though they dutifully reported the debates.

In Prince Edward Island the proposal had long met with stout resistance. Of this Tupper and Tilley were well aware; the Island was to be persuaded by money, a sum sufficient to buy out the absentee landlords. But even this was not enough. It was only after the assurance that the proposed conference would discuss only the expediency of union that the Prince Edward Island Assembly

*"Liberals" because party labels in New Brunswick had less significance than in other colonies.
was prepared to recommend the appointment of delegates. Here, as in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, the debates at the time revealed a surprising support for a general British North American union.

It was not surprising that after the debates were over Maritime union became moribund. The legislatures prorogued, the press fell silent; all that remained of Maritime union was what was printed in the official journals of the legislatures; no delegates were appointed, neither date nor place for a conference was set. There is no better testimony to the weakness of Colonial Office advocacy, when unsustained by strong support in the colonies themselves, than this fate of Maritime union. Sir Richard MacDonnell, the new Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia, arrived in Halifax on June 22 with instructions from the Colonial Office to push forward Maritime union by the best means he could, but it was doubtful how much he could have done. Before he had time to try, however, the Maritime union conference was urged on by means as unexpected as powerful: the Canadian government asked permission to attend such a conference to make proposals for a British North American federal union.

A union of all British North America—Confederation, as it was coming to be called by 1864—had a long history. It had been talked about off and on for years, even before Lord Durham had suggested it in 1839; Nova Scotia had debated it in 1854, though it was not voted on; it was Alexander Galt's condition for entering the Cartier-Macdonald government in 1858; an ambivalent resolution on the subject passed in Nova Scotia in 1861, another in Prince Edward Island in 1863; it was accepted in 1862, without enthusiasm, by the Colonial Office in London; and it was being talked about all through these years by newspaper editors looking for wider horizons, and politicians, particularly Nova Scotians, who suddenly, at the height of their power, discovered how parochial their provinces were. Confederation was a dream: it tantalized men and legislatures, sometimes appearing during the despair of bad times, sometimes in the fever of partisan politics, but nearly always, except in poets like Thomas D'Arcy McGee, or visionaries like P. S. Hamilton, the result of some crisis either of the world or of the spirit.

The reasons behind the decisive Canadian action in 1864 can be found in this feeling of crisis — in the fact of the mighty Ameri-
can Civil War, undetermined still, the reverberations of which continued to rock the border and disrupt the Atlantic—more especially, in the political crisis within the province of Canada itself. The basic difficulty was simply that of governing the province.

A majority in Canada West, the Reform party especially, had long seriously doubted that it was possible to continue the Canadian constitution. By June 1864 matters had reached such a pass—with defeats of two entirely different ministries in three months—that even in Canada East, dominated by the Conservative party, there was a disposition to recognize that the time had come to make a change. George Brown's bold offer to form a coalition government to effect these changes was accepted by the Conservatives. The proposal was to relegate Canadian regional differences to the care of two separate provinces (later to be called Ontario and Quebec) and across them to form a broad British North American federal union by including all four Atlantic provinces, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland. This coalition of parties and its programme revolutionized politics in Canada; it also put energy into the hitherto lifeless project for a Maritime union conference.

Governor MacDonnell of Nova Scotia now saw his advantage, and he pressed for decisions from the New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island governments, and from his own, for determining a place and time of meeting. Within a month of the formation of the Canadian coalition, Charlottetown on September 1 had been decided as the place and date for the opening of the conference, and two or three weeks after this decision delegates were being appointed by the three Maritime governments. Maritime union, which had had such a lacklustre response in the newspapers in the three provinces, was now discussed with more vivacity, usually juxtaposed with Confederation. The Canadian proposals were clearly having a decided effect.

Canada was not, however, in very good odour in the Maritimes. Canadian affairs were not well known, but what was known was not usually to Canadian credit. It was true that Canada had rallied to the support of Newfoundland in 1857 in the quarrel with Great Britain over the French Shore Convention, and the Newfoundlanders had not forgotten that; but Canada had had a turbulent history: rebellions in 1837, her House of Assembly burnt in 1849 (and by
Tories at that), and her public life punctuated with Grand Trunk scandals and unedifying quarrels between religious and racial groups. The abandonment of the Intercolonial railway negotiations in 1863 was only the latest episode in a rather unsavoury catalogue.

Two things were to mitigate this lamentable reputation. One was the Intercolonial survey, already mentioned, begun at Canadian expense; the second was one of those strokes of luck that Confederation was favoured with: a singularly successful visit of one hundred Canadians to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia in August 1864.

This visit was engineered by Sandford Fleming, D'Arcy McGee and the Saint John Board of Trade. It had been planned before the June crisis in Canada, at which time its purpose had been primarily social; but by the pressure of events, it now became distinctly political as well. Canadians and Maritimers hardly knew one another. Beyond the brief acquaintance that Howe, Tupper, Tilley and a few others had had with Canadians at various Intercolonial railway conferences, few Maritimers even knew what a Canadian looked like. And Canadian ignorance of the Maritimes was proverbial. When the visit was first proposed Canadians seemed a little hesitant; but when Confederation was proposed by the Canadian government a positive enthusiasm developed in Canada for the visit. Some hundred Canadians finally came: about twenty-three newspaper editors and correspondents, eighteen members of the Canadian Legislative Council, thirty-two from the Assembly and a substantial group of other gentlemen. They arrived first at Saint John on the steamer from Portland, Maine, on Friday, August 5, at eight in the evening. They were greeted at the wharf in Saint John—to their astonishment—by a huge crowd of about 10,000 people.

A fearsome round of entertainment followed. Saturday night, August 6, the Saint John Board of Trade gave an official dinner for the Canadians, the menu of which staggers the imagination of lesser mortals of the twentieth century: a monumental progress through twelve full courses. It was perhaps fortunate that the programme allowed a rest on Sunday! Monday the Canadians set off up the Saint John river by steamer. That day was a beautiful one, the heat softened by a summer breeze, and the river magnificent with its sumptuous meadows and luminous hills. A military band on board the steamer played airs, and the French Canadians, some quarter of the Canadian party, sang paddling songs in their inimitable style, swinging imaginary paddles on either side of invisible
canoes. So infectious was French-Canadian élan—which English Canadians enjoy but fail to emulate—that the New Brunswickers and Nova Scotians seemed to have the impression that French was a language nearly universal in Canada. On their way to Halifax by train from Windsor, Nova Scotia, the delegates were greeted at Half-Way House by a bunting that read, "Vive les Canadiens!"

In Halifax, as in New Brunswick, the visitors were blessed with sublime weather and this auspicious sign seemed to enhance the spirit of the parties and excursions. The best party was at the site of Queen Victoria’s father’s house on Bedford Basin, where both McGee of Canada and Howe of Nova Scotia joined in the festivities with a warmth as yet untrammelled by political complications, and where sport and speeches, made free with wine, were deftly mingled on a superb August afternoon. It was glorious fun, and the Canadian speeches, filled with union sentiment, made a decided impression. How great was evidenced in the sober comment of the Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia in a despatch to England on August 18, as the Canadians were returning home. Her Majesty’s Government, he warned, must now expect that Confederation will be “more extensively supported than was at all probable six months ago”.

II

Now a second Canadian argosy began. On Monday, August 29, early in the evening, the Canadian government steamer Queen Victoria sailed from Quebec for Charlottetown. Two-thirds of the Canadian cabinet were aboard, carrying with them far-reaching proposals for Confederation. For weeks they had been preparing their scheme of union. It had been vastly exciting, this work; and though there were difficulties, these seemed to be more personal than constitutional. Macdonald had been crotchety at times; for the cabinet meeting on Saturday, August 28, he had arrived half drunk and, what with more ale after he arrived, was cantankerous; and the meeting had broken up in a quarrel between him and Brown over contracts for the new Parliament buildings for the province of Canada that were going up at Ottawa. But the main thing, the fabric of a British North American constitution, had been started. The warp was now tied down to the loom, and the pattern set down for the weavers to follow.
The weather held fine; the hills on the north side of the St. Lawrence slid steadily down toward the horizon; the little villages on the south shore wound past, a ribbon of white houses decked with sunshine. The Canadians reclined under a broad awning, and amused themselves with talk, books and backgammon. By Wednesday morning, August 31, the Queen Victoria had reached Gaspé. Brown's account of the next stage of the voyage is too good to be served up in anything but his own style:

From Gaspé our course was direct to Charlottetown, the little capital of little Prince Edward Island. I was up at four in the morning!—Thursday morning [September 1]—to see the sunrise and have a salt water bath. We had just reached the westerly point of Prince Edward and were running along the coast of as pretty a country as you ever put your eye upon . . . About noon we came to an inlet which we entered, and running up for some miles what appeared to be a river but was in fact but an inlet of the sea [Hillsborough Bay], amid most beautiful scenery, we came suddenly on the Capital City of the Island. Our steamer dropped anchor magnificently in the stream and its man-of-war cut evidently inspired the natives with huge respect for their big brothers from Canada. I flatter myself we did that well.

Charlottetown in 1864 was a pleasant little place of about 7000 people. The town lay on a slight elevation from the harbour, its business section a little drab in the heat of late August. Its streets, dusty and red with the colour of the Island soil, seemed to run straight down to the water's edge "like the red lines of a ledger", as a Saint John writer put it. Just outside of town, beside the bay, was Government House, the attractive residence of the Lieutenant-Governor, set in a grove of fir, as were some of the more imposing houses like those of J. H. Gray or W. H. Pope. Further still, neat little white cottages amid green fields of waving grain formed, with the red soil of the shore, a "pretty setting for the opal waters of the bay".

Charlottetown had twenty hotels, but they were all rather small, holding about a dozen guests each, and what with boatloads of visitors pouring into town (200 on one boat alone) for Slaymaker's and Nichol's Olympic Circus, space was at a premium.

The Nova Scotian delegates had arrived on the boat from Pictou, early in the evening of Wednesday, August 31. But the boat was late owing to the press of travel, and no recognizable mem-
ber of the Prince Edward Island government was at the dock to greet them. According to the Charlottetown Examiner, the Nova Scotians were obliged "to find out by rule of thumb where they could find something to eat and a bed to lie upon". The Vindicator reported a rumour that a friendly oyster bar had received some of them. As for the New Brunswickers, who arrived at eleven p.m. that same night, the Examiner remarked that "neglect and indifference were measured out to them. . .with beautiful impartiality." But the opposition papers were exaggerating a little. The Provincial Secretary of Prince Edward Island, W. H. Pope, had managed to escort the New Brunswickers to their lodging at the Mansion House, and he said later that he had discovered the Nova Scotians and sent them to their quarters at the Pavilion Hotel. As for the other members of the Prince Edward Island government, it was unkindly suggested, again by the opposition press, that they could not be decently deprived of their opportunity to see the circus. In fact the initial reception of the Charlottetown Conference delegates got a thorough airing in the Charlottetown papers for the next two weeks, and in the usual Island style which was "no holds barred".

It was the next day, Thursday, September 1, that the Canadians arrived. This time the Island government was busy with preparations for the conference about to open and Pope was deputed once more to go down to the harbour. The captain of the Queen Victoria, not knowing the harbour, chose sensibly enough to anchor; so to go to the Queen Victoria Pope procured the first available transport, which happened to be an unprepossessing oyster boat, with a barrel of flour in one end and two jars of molasses in the other, with a lusty fisherman providing the propulsion. Pope duly made himself known on board the Queen Victoria, wherewith the Canadians went ashore, and with some éclat:

Having dressed ourselves [writes Brown] in the correct style, our two boats were lowered man-of-war fashion—and being each duly manned with four oarsmen and a boatswain, dressed in blue uniform, hats, belts, etc., in regular style, we pulled away for shore and landed like Mr. Christopher Columbus who had the precedence of us in taking possession of portions of the American continent.

The Charlottetown Conference was officially to discuss Maritime union, so the Canadians were there unofficially. The con-
ference therefore convened without them. At three p.m. on Thursday, September 1, 1864, the fifteen delegates from the three Maritime provinces gathered in the high, cool room—the Legislative Council chamber—in the graceful Georgian Province House. Resolutions from the three provincial legislatures were read and discussed. It was decided, however, that Canada should be heard first; Maritime union could be talked about later. This clearing of the agenda for Canadians and Confederation, as Professor D. G. Creighton has put it* was a great windfall. The Canadians were then invited in, and having gone through “the shake elbow and the how de do and the fine weather” the conference adjourned to meet on the morrow, Friday, September 2, at ten a.m.** That evening the Lieutenant-Governor of Prince Edward Island, George Dundas, gave the first formal dinner of the conference to as many of the twenty-three delegates as he could conveniently receive. Lieutenant-Governor Arthur Gordon of New Brunswick was probably present as well, for he was vitally interested in Maritime union and had come to Charlottetown with the New Brunswick delegation for the very purpose of being on hand. One can surmise he was rather annoyed with the Canadians for undermining, as it now appeared, his pet project, and he went back to Fredericton almost at once. His annoyance was to reappear in the months to come.

It was the next morning at ten that Canada opened up with her heavy artillery. The order the Canadians spoke in is not certain; Brown’s account disagrees with newspaper reports, but one is inclined to follow the account of one who was there. It is not without interest that the same order that Brown describes as being followed at Charlottetown was also followed in the Confederation debates in Canada early in 1865.

Macdonald and Cartier began by setting out the general arguments in favour of Confederation, with a broad outline of the Canadian proposals. There was speculation about these proposals in the Charlottetown papers, and some complaint about the secrecy with which they were shrouded. But in truth secrecy was indispensible. Though some members of the conference had been in

* D. G. Creighton, John A. Macdonald: the young politician (Toronto, 1952), 365.

**See Bibliographical Note, p. 28, for comments on this timing.
favour of making the proceedings “open court”, this was overruled. The business was conducted in an informal, conversational way, with apparently no resolutions and no minutes. As the reporter for the Saint John Morning Telegraph remarked, “buncombe speeches will be out of place, and politicians will for once deal with naked facts. This will facilitate matters greatly. . . .” No one knows what Macdonald or Cartier actually said, but it can be surmised from what is known about the conference proceedings. The plan of Confederation had been brought to Charlottetown well thought out. Macdonald stressed the broad grant of power to be given to the central government together with some specific illustrations of that power. Also clear was his determination to avoid what he believed were the weaknesses of the United States. Cartier elucidated the same problem with emphasis on the need of French Canadians for their own institutions and civil law.

It was Macdonald or Cartier who outlined the proposals for the future Senate. The Senate—or Legislative Council as it was then called—was considered by many to be the main federal institution of the whole system, and much was believed to depend upon its structure. It was put forward at Charlottetown—and agreed to—that representation in the Senate should consist of twenty members from Canada West, twenty from Canada East, and twenty from the three Maritime provinces. This was straightforward enough. The arrangement did not however include Newfoundland, and Newfoundland’s appearance at the Quebec Conference was to upset this neat system. Apparently no decision was made at Charlottetown about the selection of members to the Senate, whether by appointment or election. Conservatives preferred appointment, Liberals election, but, as for example with Brown, the issue crossed party lines. It was left to the Quebec Conference to negotiate this difficulty.

Neither Macdonald nor Cartier dealt much with details. Financial details were left to Galt for the next day, Saturday, and constitutional details for Brown on Monday. What Macdonald and Cartier did was to urge the arguments for British North American union with all the power at their command. To call up national aspirations, to extend the dimensions of provincial minds by glittering phrases and noble oratory was not perhaps within the power of these two practical, empirically-minded politicians; they relied on
good fellowship and on alcohol to effect such translations. What they were concerned with was to show that such a union was practicable, that it could be realized by the twenty-three gentlemen presently seated around the table in Province House, Charlottetown. If the delegates could be convinced of the practicability of Confederation, the idea was magnetic enough—provided the conference parties went off well—to take hold by itself.

That afternoon, when the session was over, they all went to W. H. Pope's house for a grand buffet luncheon—à la fourchette as it was then called—oysters, lobsters and other Island delicacies, all well lubricated with champagne. That evening was a beautiful moonlit one; some delegates went walking or driving, some Canadians who lived on the Queen Victoria went boating; George Brown, who was staying at Pope's house, spent it on Pope's balcony, "looking out on the sea in all its glory".

Saturday, September 3, was Galt's day. Here was what to many delegates was the crux of the question: how were the great financial disparities between the different provinces of the Confederation to be resolved? Galt proposed, first, that the existing debts of the several provinces be assumed by the central government. Whether the debt allowance principle was yet devised is not certain, but it seems probable that it was. Obviously some method had to be found of equalizing the different amounts of debt of the five provinces. Second, it was clear that the new central government would assume the greater part of the revenue presently available to the provinces. Some special provision would therefore have to be made for the revenue of the future provincial governments. Customs duties supplied eighty per cent of the existing revenue of the three Maritime provinces. This removed, as it would be by Confederation, it was obvious that, however diminished future provincial responsibilities might be, additional revenue would be required. Direct taxation was recognized to be virtually impossible: in other words, a subsidy would be needed. Almost certainly this was considered at Charlottetown. How much, whether eighty cents per capita, is not known, but again it is probable that some tentative figure had been arrived at.

There were also a number of particular items discussed. Should, for example, Prince Edward Island be given a capital grant of some £200,000 Sterling to enable her to buy out the absentee
landlords? The land question was a vital one in Prince Edward Island—as the Tenant League riots in 1865 were to show—and there is evidence that the conference was willing to consider dealing with it. One of the Prince Edward Island delegates, George Coles, said that not only had it been agreed to in the conference, but that in private conversation Cartier and Brown had admitted the justice of the Prince Edward Island case. This proposal was “the talk of the town” when it got out in the Charlottetown papers two weeks later, and its omission from the Quebec Resolutions helped to determine Prince Edward Island’s resistance to Confederation later in the year.

Galt’s economy of speech, the neatness of his solutions, his persuasive mastery of his figures, were very impressive. No finance minister in the Maritimes could match his wizardry, not even Leonard Tilley of New Brunswick, who had risen to power on the strength of his financial acumen. And one suspects it was Galt who clinched the real practicability of Confederation in the minds of the delegates. So by the weekend of September 3 it seemed, to the correspondent of the Saint John Morning Telegraph at least, that the new “Confederate” cruiser in the harbour, the Queen Victoria, promised fairly to outrival the Alabama or the Tallahassee in the number and value of her conquests. New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island have all been within range of her big guns since Friday morning last, and great it is said has been the effect. Indeed her ordnance is of a superior kind, and embraces such well known pieces of artillery as the Cartier, the Brown, the Macdonald and the Galt . . . I am told that two of the Provinces, at least, are about entering into bonds, whilst the third is on the eve of lowering her flag . . . I am told that the speeches have been able and powerful and the arguments almost irresistible. Furthermore, it is the case that our own delegates are still more favourable to [British North American] union than they were, and as they consult and converse with the Canadians, the difficulties in the matter of detail vanish.

And it was to the Queen Victoria, appropriately enough, that the Charlottetown Conference adjourned for lunch on Saturday after Galt’s speech. The Canadians had a strong belief then, and at Quebec, in the efficaciousness of good food and plenty of wine to make a party—or a conference—go. The Queen Victoria had come down with cases of champagne in her hold, and there was no stint in their use. At four lunch began. The conference work was
over for the week-end; things had gone superbly well and the luncheon rapidly developed a good deal of abandon. Champagne flowed like water, and union talk with it. The occasion took hold of everyone. Champagne and union! Cartier and Brown got to their feet and expanded the idea of a new nation to its grandest dimensions, and such was the warmth of the cause that someone rose and published, there and then, the banns of marriage between the colonies. Was it conceivable that a great British North American confederation was now actually within reach? Some began to believe it, and act as they believed. Here was a metamorphosis indeed: this transformation of the dross of reality into the gold of personal conviction. Perhaps the most remarkable achievement of the whole conference was the conversion of a significant proportion of the Maritime delegates to the cause of Confederation. For the sake of Confederation not a few would, before six months were past, put at stake their political careers, in some cases even their personal reputations.

On Monday the conference heard George Brown on the constitutional details. The division of powers between the central government and the local governments had obviously been well thought out even before the conference began. There was no doubt either that the French-Canadian delegates, Cartier and Langevin, were ready to give as much power to the local legislatures as possible; but the other Canadian delegates, and apparently a majority of Maritime ones, wanted to reduce the powers of the local legislatures still further. The reports in the newspapers reveal how far the Charlottetown Conference had gone in determining this question, even to consideration of the detailed powers to be given to the federal government. The Halifax Morning Chronicle, whose editor, Jonathan McCully, was a delegate, reported on September 10 a list of the division of powers that accurately anticipates that finally established at Quebec. In other papers there were hints of central government guarantees for the religious and educational privileges of minorities.

Brown also discussed the constitution of the judiciary. It was proposed by the Canadians that all judges from the Superior Court level upward would be appointed and paid by the central government. The discussion on this point was animated, for it became apparent that some of the more venal of the delegates took exception to being deprived of judicial plums now within their reach in provincial judiciaries. Two of the New Brunswick delegates, however, Tilley
and Chandler, argued strongly for the adoption of the Canadian proposals.

On Tuesday, September 6, the conference discussed details. The Canadians answered questions and, after brief though strenuous speeches by Langevin, McGee and McDougall, closed their case that day. On Wednesday the conference excluded the Canadians and once more turned to its belated discussion of Maritime union. Tupper proposed, and Dickey seconded, the following resolution:

Whereas in the opinion of this Conference a Union of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island under one Government and Legislature would elevate the status—enhance the credit—enlarge the influence—improve the social commercial and political condition—increase the development and promote the interests generally of all these Provinces. Resolved that the time has arrived when such Union should be effected.

That resolution was never passed, however. Leonard Tilley forcefully expressed the view that the Maritime provinces could obtain better terms in a British North American Confederation separately than collectively. Tilley was probably right. Certainly it was a feeling shared by the Islanders. They were still dead against Maritime union; only if the capital were to be in Charlottetown might they change their minds! In the streets of Charlottetown, one reporter noted, when some of the Island delegation were walking along, people said, "There go the men who would sell their country." No, the Islanders would not part with their cherished legislature. Only a federal union was acceptable to them. So the Maritime delegates gave the Canadians their answer: they were unanimous in believing Confederation highly desirable, if the terms could be made satisfactory to all. And they were prepared to give further consideration to the question of terms. That having been done, the Charlottetown Conference was adjourned until Monday, September 12, when it was to meet, at the invitation of the Nova Scotians, at Province House, Halifax.

Thursday, September 8, was a holiday. Excursions were made into the country and to the north side of the Island for the warm sea bathing fourteen miles distant at Brackley Beach. That evening came the grand ball given by the people of Prince Edward Island at Province House. The building was taken over: the Legislative Council chamber—where the Conference had met—was made into a reception room; the library was a bar and refreshment room, while the Assembly was now a dancing floor, the walls decorated with flags and mirrors, and its usual purposes well concealed. Two bands provided the music; the dancing started at ten and festivities continued till one a.m., when supper was announced. After supper, in Brown's words, "the Goths commenced speech-making and actually
kept it up for 2 hours and three-quarters, the poor girls being condemned to listen to it all!"

So it was nearly five o'clock in the morning, on Friday, September 9, when the Canadians, Nova Scotians, New Brunswickers and Islanders (for the Charlottetown Conference was to continue) went down to a foggy harbour and crowded aboard the Queen Victoria for the journey across to Nova Scotia. The fog, so the ubiquitous reporter for the Saint John Morning Telegraph observed, was entirely in keeping with the generally befogged condition of the delegates after the rigours of the Ball.

The Queen Victoria reached Pictou about noon that day. Most of the delegates travelled after that by land, by carriage to Truro, then by the Nova Scotian government railway the sixty miles to Halifax, stopping at the Waverly gold mines on the way. Galt's eyes were jocularly supposed to have glistened at the prospect! Langevin, Macdonald and McGee stayed aboard the Queen Victoria, however, as she made her way around from Pictou to Halifax via the Gut of Canso between Cape Breton and the mainland of Nova Scotia. She was in Halifax harbour blowing off steam when the rest of the delegates arrived by train.

The Maritime delegates convened briefly in the red chamber of the Legislative Council in Province House, Halifax that Saturday. On Monday, September 12, they met once more. Could they finally resolve the issue of Maritime union? Some delegates wondered—not without cause—what the public would think of their action in abandoning (as it now appeared) their original purpose. It was soon apparent that even with this spur the Maritime delegates could not agree. After an hour's meeting the Canadians were invited in again. It was at this point that the Quebec Conference was agreed upon, to meet at Quebec on October 10 to work out the final details of Confederation.

It was a foretaste of what was to come at Quebec that on that day the fine weather broke at last and rain fell in torrents. While thunder rolled overhead a great public dinner was in progress at the Halifax Hotel. John A. Macdonald seemed to catch the spirit of the occasion. "Everyone admits," he said, "that Union must take place sometime. I say now is the time." Two days later, Wednesday, September 14, when the Charlottetown Conference had arrived in Saint John, McGee emphasized this point. "If we do not
avail ourselves of the present opportunity of forming a Union with our fellow colonists we would never have another."

On Thursday, September 15, the conference set off to Fredericton by steamer. Cartier, Galt and Brown stayed with Lieutenant-Governor Arthur Gordon, who plied them with questions about the conference and who reported it all, with elaborate criticisms, to Edward Cardwell at the Colonial Office. The delegates were back in Saint John the following evening, and it was there, on Friday, September 16, that they separated.* Some Canadians went home via Portland, Maine; most took a special train to Shediac where the Queen Victoria was waiting. Three days later she arrived at Quebec. The Canadian cabinet ministers had been gone just three weeks.

III

It was not going to be easy to persuade Maritimers that this Canadian coup de théâtre was justified. It was undeniable that the Maritime delegates had only been authorized by their legislatures to discuss Maritime union. The Saint John Morning Telegraph on September 16, 1864, was severe:

We cannot but express our indignation at the pusillanimous conduct of the Lower Province delegates. They were sent to Charlottetown . . . to discuss the question of a Union of their own Provinces. Under the blandishments of Canadian politicians (who invited themselves to the Conference!) they placed the Union of the Lower Provinces entirely in the background. . . . They come back, of course, without having considered the subject which their Legislatures gave them for discussion, and admit themselves so overpowered by the "Canadian view" that they can think of nothing else. Such prostitution of intellect has seldom been equalled.

In Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia there had been Confederation resolutions in years past and these no doubt supplied some authority; but in New Brunswick there seemed to be nothing

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*The Charlottetown Conference was formally adjourned sine die on Nov. 3, 1864, in Toronto, a week after the end of the Quebec Conference.
that warranted the delegates' doing what they had done. But the
Confederationists had an ace up their sleeve: it was a despatch from
the high authority of the Colonial Secretary, authorizing the North
American colonies to discuss Confederation. True, the despatch
was from the Duke of Newcastle and two years old—July 6, 1862—
but it supplied a much-needed justification for the action of the
New Brunswick delegates. It is fair to say that the opposition in
all three provinces was by no means prepared to accept such ex-
cuses; but clearly some authority was better than none.

Some of this opposition arose from people who had not been at
Charlottetown, and who had not undergone the heady discovery of
a national destiny for British North America. From New Bruns-
wick two important members of the opposition were missing,
Timothy Anglin and A. J. Smith. They were passed over because
they did not support Maritime union. Missing from the Nova
Scotian delegation was Joseph Howe, who had often talked about a
union of British North America. Tupper had wanted to include
Howe and officially invited him. Howe was willing to go; but he
was now an officer of the Imperial government, the Fisheries Com-
missioner pursuant to the Reciprocity Treaty between British North
America and the United States. Howe wrote the British Foreign
Secretary, Lord Russell, for permission to attend the Charlottetown
Conference, but a reply from Russell was not forthcoming in time,
and Howe felt obliged to decline Tupper's invitation. (As it
turned out, Russell was against Howe's going.) So while the dele-
gates were gathering at Charlottetown, Howe, a leading proponent
of British North American union, was off on his duties as Fisheries
Commissioner, actually on his way from St. John's, Newfoundland,
up to the Labrador coast in the 700-ton H. M. S. Lily. The conse-
quences of Howe's absence from both the Charlottetown and Que-
bec conferences are difficult to estimate. Edward Whelan, editor
of the Charlottetown Examiner, and G. E. Fenety, editor of the
Saint John Morning News, both of whom knew Howe, said that he
would have supported Confederation if he had been at Charlottet-
town and Quebec. But this is at best doubtful; Howe had been
growing away from his earlier ideas of a British North American
union and was now thinking more in Imperial terms.

Nor was there at Charlottetown a representative from New-
foundland. Maritime union had not envisaged the inclusion of
Newfoundland. There was good reason why not. The real
centre of Newfoundland was the Avalon peninsula, at the extreme south-east corner of the province, over 300 miles from the Gulf of St. Lawrence, at the furthest possible remove from the mainland of British North America. Newfoundland faced east, not west. And she was not invited to the Charlottetown Conference. As it happened, the Premier of Newfoundland, Hugh Hoyles, had been in Halifax in mid-August, and he had talked to Charles Tupper about Newfoundland's position. Tupper would probably have been willing to propose the attendance of Newfoundlanders at the conference unofficially, like the Canadians; but it was late for an invitation and a little inconvenient, for Newfoundland was in the process of changing governors. But Newfoundland was not neglected. Within a week of the return of the Canadians to Quebec an invitation went off to St. John's asking for representatives at the Quebec Conference. The invitation was accepted.

Besides omissions among the delegates at the conference table at Charlottetown there were also omissions from the constitution for British North America. No mention is made in any of the reports from Charlottetown of the power of disallowance, or of the power of the central government to appoint the future lieutenant-governors. Almost certainly these were additions made at Quebec, and are explained by a combination of circumstances. Pressure from the lieutenant-governors was one reason. Gordon, for example, thought central appointment of provincial lieutenant-governors indispensable. More influential, perhaps, was the apparent acceptance of the Charlottetown proposals by the French Canadians. On September 26, a résumé of the Charlottetown conclusions was published in leading Canadian ministerial newspapers including the Quebec Courrier du Canada. The French-Canadian reaction—or lack of it—may have persuaded Macdonald and other centralists at the Quebec Conference to press their views further and Cartier and the French ministers to acquiesce. And with American relations growing more strained as the autumn drew on, a strong central government seemed increasingly desirable.

Most of all, what was missing from the Charlottetown Conference was any effective progress toward Maritime union. It is clear that it reached the conference table by a strength not its own. It had never developed sufficient force to overcome the resistance of the men and the institutions it would abolish. By contrast, the federal union proposed by the Canadians guaranteed the continued existence
of the provinces, even though in an attenuated form. Moreover, Confederation promised something that Maritime union could not: a transcontinental nation. It was true that this proposal had come from Canada, and things Canadian often had something sub rosa about them; but national glory was surely something about which even Canadians could be genuine. The idea of a British North American nation might be unrealistic, but it called up in the minds of the young, the energetic and the talented hopes and ambitions hitherto only dreamed of.

The Charlottetown Conference was only a preliminary to the greater exertions of the Quebec Conference: but the Quebec Conference was also the conclusion to the important beginning made at Charlottetown. The Charlottetown Conference agreed upon the main principles of Confederation: the Quebec Conference was to fasten down details. The Charlottetown Conference gave Confederation in the Maritimes something of the impetus it already had in Canada; more important, it gave the delegates themselves a sense of a common destiny, a devotion to a cause greater than their old local loyalties; indeed, it swept some delegates out of their insular identities altogether.

Maritimers had often resented Canadians before, and would again; but the vision of a future that would end what Howe that very summer called their insignificance, the comprehensiveness of the means the Canadians proposed, the vital energy they possessed, swept the Charlottetown Conference like a flame. The conference was a Canadian triumph; it had been more than Canadians had dared hope; but it was also the dawn of a national identity, the beginning, as the Fredericton Head Quarters prophesied, "of a great change in the fortunes of the British North American Provinces".
Delegates to the Charlottetown Conference

New Brunswick

Chandler, Edward Barron (1800-1880), since 1836 member of the Legislative Council; represented the Conservative opposition in 1864, was also at the Quebec and London Conferences.

Gray, John Hamilton (1814-1889), since 1850 member for Saint John County in the Assembly; Conservative; was also at the Quebec Conference.

Johnson, John Mercer (1818-1868), since 1850 member for Northumberland County in the Assembly; Attorney-General in the Tilley government; was also at the Quebec and London Conferences.

Steeves, William Henry (1814-1873), since 1851 member of the Legislative Council; Minister without portfolio in the Tilley government; was also at the Quebec Conference.

Tilley, Samuel Leonard (1818-1896), since 1857 member for Saint John City in the Assembly; Premier and Financial Secretary since 1861; was also at the Quebec and London Conferences.

Nova Scotia

Archibald, Adams George (1814-1892), since 1851 member for Colchester County in the Assembly; since 1863 leader of the Liberal opposition; was also at the Quebec and London Conferences.

Dickey, Robert Barry (1811-1903), since 1858 member of the Legislative Council; Conservative; was also at the Quebec Conference.

Henry, William Alexander (1816-1888), since 1841 member for Antigonish County; since 1863 Attorney-General in the Conservative government; was also at the Quebec and London Conferences.

McCully, Jonathan (1809-1877), since 1847 member of the Legislative Council; Liberal; since 1857 editor of the Halifax Morning Chronicle; was also at the Quebec and London Conferences.
Tupper, Charles (1821-1915), since 1855 member for Cumberland County; since 1863 Provincial Secretary and since February 1864 Premier; was also at the Quebec and London Conferences.

Prince Edward Island

Coles, George (1810-1875), since 1842 member for First District of Queens County; leader of the Liberal opposition in the Assembly; was also at the Quebec Conference.

Gray, John Hamilton (1812-1887), since 1858 member for Fourth District of Queens; since 1863 Premier of the Conservative government; Chairman of the Charlottetown Conference; was also a delegate to the Quebec Conference.

Macdonald, Andrew Archibald (1829-1912), member of Assembly, 1853-1858, and since 1863 member of the Legislative Council; leader of the Liberal opposition in the Legislative Council; was also at the Quebec Conference, and his notes of that Conference were published in the Canadian Historical Review, Vol. I (1920).

Palmer, Edward (1809-1889), member of Assembly, 1835-1860, and since 1860 member of the Legislative Council, and leader of the Conservatives there; Premier from 1859 to 1863; then Attorney-General; was also at the Quebec Conference.

Pope, William Henry (1825-1879), since 1863 member for Belfast; Provincial Secretary since 1859; Conservative; owner of the Charlottetown Islander; was also at the Quebec Conference.

Canada

Brown, George (1818-1880), since 1863 member for South Oxford in the Assembly; leader of the Reform party of Canada West; owner of the Toronto Globe; became President of the Council on formation of coalition of June 1864 under the premiership of Sir Etienne Taché; was also at the Quebec Conference.

Campbell, Alexander (1822-1892), since 1858 member for Catararaqui Division in the Legislative Council; in 1864 made Commissioner of Crown Lands; Conservative; was also at the Quebec Conference.
Cartier, George Etienne (1814-1873), since 1861 member for Montreal East in the Assembly; Attorney-General of Canada East, 1856-1862, and again in 1864; also at the Quebec and London Conferences.

Galt, Alexander Tillock (1817-1893), since 1853 member for Sherbrooke in the Assembly; Minister of Finance, 1858-1862, and again in 1864; was also at the Quebec and London Conferences.

Langevin, Hector Louis (1826-1906), since 1857 member for Dorchester in the Assembly; 1864 Solicitor-General; was at the Quebec and London Conferences.

Macdonald, John Alexander (1815-1891), since 1844 member for Kingston in the Assembly; Attorney-General of Canada West, 1854-1862, and again in 1864; was also at the Quebec and London Conferences.

McDougall, William (1822-1905), 1858-1863, member for North Oxford in the Assembly, and in 1864 member for North Lanark; Reformer; became Provincial Secretary in the coalition government of 1864; was also at the Quebec and London Conferences.

McGee, Thomas D'Arcy (1825-1868), since 1858 member for Montreal West in the Assembly; at first a Reformer, becoming a Conservative in 1864, and joining the Cabinet as Minister of Agriculture; was also at the Quebec Conference.
Bibliographical Note


There are discrepancies between Brown's letter and Tupper's minutes. Brown says the Canadians were present, and speaking, at the conference on Friday, September 2nd. Tupper says they only joined the conference on the Saturday. But there are two good reasons for preferring Brown. First, Brown gives specifically four full days of Canadian speeches before the Conference, with some details of speeches and who made them: Friday, September 2nd; Saturday, September 3rd; Monday, September 5th; Tuesday, September 6th. Tupper's brief draft minutes give no details. Second, Brown's account is corroborated by the correspondent of the Saint John Morning Telegraph who was in Charlottetown at the time. He reported, as of Monday, September 5th, "New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island have all been within range of her guns [Canada's] since Friday morning last . . . ."

A comprehensive treatment of the background of the Charlottetown Conference, and something of the conference itself is W.M. Whitelaw's The Maritimes and Canada before Confederation (Toronto, 1934), reprinted in paperback, 1966. There is much solid good sense in this book. D. G. Creighton has given the setting of the conference and Macdonald's role in it in John A. Macdonald: the young politician (Toronto, 1952.) He gives more details in his Road to Confederation (Toronto, 1964), as does F. W. P. Bolger, Prince Edward Island and Confederation (Charlottetown, 1967), the latter of which now largely supersedes D. C. Harvey's "Confederation in Prince Edward Island" (CHR, 1933.) For British policy see J. A. Gibson's "Colonial office view of Canadian federation, 1856-1868" (CHR, 1954), his "Duke of Newcastle and British North American affairs, 1859-64" (CHR, 1963), and P. B. Waite's "Edward Cardwell and Confederation" (CHR, 1962).