

THE HERITAGE OF THE MARITIMES¹

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AS a repatriated Maritimer with happy experience in Western Canada, I have during the last three years, as Archivist for Nova Scotia, been digging around the roots of Maritime character and institutions, in an effort to understand their origin and significance; and, to-night, in the few minutes at my disposal, I am going to offer some tentative conclusions as to the heritage of the Maritimes. These conclusions must be very general, may be very obvious, but I hope not too vague or obscure. In any event, I shall start clearly by distinguishing between the heritage from nature, i.e., the land and the people, and the heritage from nurture, i.e., the social organization and culture.

Once upon a time I had to explain to the socially curious wife of an Oxford don that Prince Edward Island, even though part of Canada, was still called an island, because it is always surrounded by water, and that Cape Breton was a salt lake surrounded by land and re-encircled by the sea. Nova Scotia, too, is almost an island, being separated from New Brunswick by two small tidal rivers and a short portage. Even New Brunswick is washed on three sides by salt water, and the shores of all these provinces are so indented as to multiply the coast-line many times, and to enable their inhabitants to live either beside the sea or within easy reach of salt water or a tidal stream.

The most conspicuous heritage, therefore, of the Maritime Provinces, that which has given them their name and unique character, is the all-pervading presence of the sea; hence their love of the sea, their early dependence upon it for much of their livelihood, their conscious kinship with the British Isles during the last century, and their reluctance to substitute the indirect Canadian connection for their earlier direct contacts with Imperial Britain. Though this love of the sea is as natural to the Maritimer as the air he breathes, he himself, with few exceptions, does not give it literary expression. It devolved, therefore, upon an Upper Canadian, the late Dr. MacMechan, an adopted son, scrutinizing his heritage, to discover this open secret and to reveal it in prose and verse. He, in turn, but verified a prophecy of that gifted Irish-Canadian, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, who, in advocating

1. A Radio Address, carried on the Canadian Radio Commission Network, March 1, 1934.

Confederation, told his fellow-Canadians that in uniting with the Maritimes they were about to recover one of their lost senses—the sense that comprehends the sea. This, then, is the first heritage of the Maritimes and their first contribution to the Dominion. It was seen in the primary interest of Europeans in our fisheries, which coloured all our early history, in the privateering industry of the Napoleonic wars and the War of 1812, in the struggle with the United States for control of the West India trade, in the ship-building industry which dominated our golden age; and it still lives in countless families whose homes contain mementoes of their distant voyages. It lives to-day in the heart of many a retired sea-captain in the Canadian West who contemplates ruefully the “prairie schooner” and swaps stories in the *Cutty Sark Club* of Winnipeg. Its power in transforming the lives of men may be studied with profit in the story of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, where a community of land-loving immigrants from Hanover have in less than two centuries become the finest deep-sea fishermen on the North Atlantic.

The biological heritage of the Maritimes prior to this century was such as to cheer the most fanatical of Nordics. The foundation stock, whether Acadian, English, German, New England, Loyalist, Scottish or Irish was to the scientist all of one race, differentiated only superficially by historical experience. On biological grounds they were all susceptible of fusion into one homogeneous people. But history has not verified the hypothesis of the melting pot, even in the Maritimes, where no racial or colour barrier to inter-marriage exists. Generally speaking, Acadian, American, Scottish and Irish have intermarried within their own groups, and the unity that exists is political and geographical rather than biological. Though all have developed a strong local patriotism and are willing to co-operate with lesser breeds for the common provincial good, each group still keeps alive in national societies or conventions, that meet periodically, the modest conviction that it comprises the pick of God’s chosen people. But this is a harmless diversion which, like the Maritime Clubs in central and western Canada, affords an opportunity for sublimating the casual instinct that a good man is a matter of geography. The people of the Maritimes, therefore, are imperial in race though provincial in politics, and clannish in religion and society.

Organised society as transmitted to Maritimers of to-day dates from the 18th century, and in its origins naturally embodied the class distinctions of that period. These were most pronounced

in the respective capitals, but, through the system of land tenure and local government, appeared also in the rural communities. In the capital of each province an aristocratic official coterie paid court to the governor, or representative of the Crown. This coterie included the officials of government, the military and naval officers, the judges and leading lawyers, the bishop or higher clergy and the more prominent merchants. The remainder of the citizens of the capital, and practically all of the rural communities, were looked upon with good humoured tolerance unless they attempted to break into these exclusive circles. The government itself was paternal in character, the governor and his council being regarded as the custodians of the Royal prerogative, and the Assembly as a necessary agency for giving information as to the needs of the people and for voting supplies supplementary to the Imperial parliamentary grant. This coterie and this government were willing to patronize literature and art, and even agriculture, but it thought in terms of peasant and proprietor and of perpetual class distinctions.

Now it is the glory of the Maritimers that they were able to refashion this political and social organization so as to democratize it in the direction of a career open to talent, without reducing all to a low level of uniformity. In other words, the Maritime social and political heritage is one of open antagonism to monopoly and privilege *per se*, coupled with profound respect for social distinctions founded on merit and justice. They delight to honour their governor, premier, chief-justice or bishop, because he has risen to eminence through merit rather than favour, and can be replaced by a better man if he prove unworthy. Or again, this heritage of the Maritimes is that of equal rights to unequal things, and a faith that the fault is in themselves, not in their stars, if they cannot become a governor, premier, judge or bishop; and it is interesting to note how all the national groups within the three provinces have found worthy representatives in all important positions; one Acadian has been premier of New Brunswick, another of Prince Edward Island, and the present premier of Nova Scotia derives from both Acadian and Scottish ancestry. This could be illustrated at length, but I have time only to note in passing that, of the four prime ministers that the Maritimes have given to Canada, three, Sir Charles Tupper, Sir Robert Borden, and Right Honourable R. B. Bennett bear pre-Loyalist New England names, while the fourth, Sir John Thompson, was a Nova Scotian Scot.

The fourth aspect of our Maritime heritage that I must not ignore is our respect for education. A respect for manners and the

code of a gentleman came into the Maritimes like the common law of England, and like it, was preserved until modified by local legislation. The early official classes found ways and means of inculcating their principles upon their own children, but were content to leave the masses in ignorance. The pre-Loyalists did not have many private schools, and the Loyalist college at Windsor did not serve a large constituency. Nowhere in the Maritime Provinces prior to the 19th century was there any marked concern for popular education; but in all these provinces, with the new century, there was a change of heart, and for the next fifty years, when competition was rife between the principles of public and private schools, denominational and secular education, between the principles of subscription and assessment, the desirability and necessity of education were thoroughly debated, and gradually its fruits were gathered and the Maritimes began to build up the tradition of being an exporter of educational and professional men to the United States and Western Canada; soon these distinguished Maritimers abroad were held up to the younger generation for inspiration and encouragement. I cannot pause to illustrate, but it is a fact that every Maritime Province can point to a long list of men who have been educated here for eminent positions elsewhere. This is a source of legitimate pride, and is a valuable legacy unless the small potatoes or the windfalls only are kept at home. Curiously enough, these were produced in adverse circumstances without elaborate equipment, and to this day the Maritimes are very reluctant to provide their school children with aesthetic surroundings. But though they insist that the scholar must ever scorn delights and live laborious days, they still have faith that the stream has not run dry; and, like a mother sending her sons to war, they are reconciled to their own loss, if these sons can build up their own careers in helping to build up Canada as a whole.

To sum up what has necessarily been a summary treatment of a great subject, it may be said that the youth of the Maritimes have an ennobling heritage to preserve and improve. They have a sea-girt land of varied resources, upon which their ancestors laboured hard to transmit to them the means of livelihood, habits of industry and a sense of the beautiful. In entering into this heritage, they must beware of losing those habits of industry and of regarding natural beauty as something of value only to tourists. They come of a people who had founded and lost an empire on this continent, but whose civilization, in a modified form, has been carried by their immediate ancestors from the Atlantic to the

Pacific. It is theirs to enrich this civilization for their own posterity. They have inherited an instinct of government, not as a sacrosanct thing imposed from without, but as "a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants",—a contrivance that their ancestors moulded at need, a contrivance that this generation also may adapt to its own circumstances. They have inherited a respect for education and a belief in their intellectual pre-eminence, and though the latter may at the moment be a matter of doubt, it may be re-established, if they are willing to pay the price, in the currency of rigorous self-denial and self-discipline. They have inherited the practice of religious tolerance from a century of spiritual wrestling that has taught them effectively the futility of religious strife. They have inherited in a special sense the sympathy, understanding and goodwill of their American neighbours, whose ancestors were once the guardians of the Maritimes for the British Empire, and laid the foundations of British civilization here. In an especial sense Maritimer and New Englander have been able to maintain friendly intercourse, combined with mutual respect for national boundaries, and, while keeping their line-fences in repair, like good neighbours, they have left stiles open at frequent intervals for the friendly interchange of culture and hospitality. Lastly, the youth of the Maritimes have a great heritage of history, more than three centuries of romantic and utilitarian endeavour as inspiring as it is interesting. The value of this heritage has too long been diminished by a tendency to concentrate upon romantic episodes to the neglect of the great social, economic and political experiments that have been made in these provinces. Only by a careful investigation of these social economic and political experiments can the Maritimer understand and enter into his heritage.