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SOME NOVA SCOTIAN POETS OF CONFEDERATION

CONFEDERATION WAS IMPOSED upon Nova Scotia in 1867 over the opposition of significant groups of people within the province. There were many reasons for their opposition to union, and a great deal has been written concerning the nature of the struggle and the ultimate success of the Confederates.¹ That Nova Scotia's response to Confederation was highly emotional has not gone unnoticed. The opponents of union made use, with some force, of such catchwords as "liberty" and "constitutional practice" and a substantial body of pamphlet literature, some of it of high quality, attests to the virility of the debate in Nova Scotia. In addition, the newspapers of the province waged an incessant struggle for the minds and votes of Nova Scotians. Although they may at times have bordered on the ridiculous, there can be little doubt that the protagonists were engaged in a heated debate.²

One aspect of the war of words that has been overlooked by researchers is the presentation of political "poetry" in support of the various stands taken. The anti-Confederates had by far the best of this part of the struggle. With one exception, the poems presented here were composed and published at the height of the union debate in Nova Scotia. The rhyme and metre may not have been consistently good, but the expression was forceful and reflected the preoccupations of those involved in the struggle. All of the poems were printed in the newspapers of the day and all were written anonymously. They are reproduced as nearly as possible as they were printed.

The anti-Confederates took their stand in 1867 on the question of non-consultation. The fact that the proposed union had not been tested at the polls was a convincing, if constitutionally untenable, argument. This position was buttressed by the more sombre, but equally explosive, issue of economic consequences, a factor that was especially important in the first election held under Confederation. In combination, the emotional and the economic arguments

proved unbeatable.³ The Anti-Confederation or "Nova Scotia" Party could claim eighteen of the nineteen members elected to Canada's first House of Commons, although the vicissitudes of national politics were soon to break down the solidarity of the anti-unionists. It was the determination of the British government to see the Confederation through its formative period that ultimately forced Nova Scotia to "accept the situation". This was not to be achieved, however, before Nova Scotians had an opportunity to lodge a substantial protest and gain some very real financial and political concessions.⁴

The theme of alienation that characterizes so many of the poems was not an empty one for those who opposed Confederation. While the sentiments may appear quaint and dated to the political realist of today, they were very real to the generation that had just come through Nova Scotia's "Golden Age".⁵ The immediate pre-Confederation years had been a period of great accomplishment for Nova Scotia. Responsible government had been won after a long and arduous struggle, and Nova Scotians had achieved a measure of economic prosperity for which they had been striving in vain through a number of generations. It was a proud and self-conscious people that swallowed the bitter pill of Confederation, accepting as they did the necessity of lodging effective control over their destiny in the hands of "those who live above the tide and who know little and care less for our interest or our experience."⁶ Much of the opposition in Nova Scotia came from those who had contributed rather dearly to the economic and political maturation of their province. It was their force and power that gave the anti-Confederation movement its vitality; and it was their ultimate capitulation that caused it to disintegrate.

The first two poems presented are from the period before the election of September 18, 1867. They were both written in the heat of the debate over the passage of the British North America Act through the British parliament—over the protestations of Joseph Howe and the Anti-Confederation League. The four subsequent poems were all presented during the period between the election and the failure of Howe's second mission to London in the Spring of 1868. This latter period was the high-water mark of the anti-Confederation propaganda. Triumphant at the polls and confident of their power, the members of the Anti-Confederation League were pressing for the repeal of the British North America Act, in so far as it applied to Nova Scotia. Viewing the period with the hindsight of the historian, we can perhaps postulate that the antis were whistling in the dark; for during the same period the fissures that would ultimately rend the movement asunder were beginning to appear

on the surface. Howe ran head on into the steadfastness of Imperial London in 1868, and the movement was doomed to an early death.

But so long as there was hope there was engagement. The verses here presented reflected the intensity of feeling which gripped Nova Scotia during the struggle. It is perhaps a commentary on the Nova Scotia mentality that the violence just below the surface of some of the poems was never considered a feasible political reaction to the intransigence of the British. The final poem comes from another generation. Written twenty years after Confederation, it reflects the continuing preoccupation of the Nova Scotia government with its alienation from the decision-making processes in Ottawa. It came at the height of a repeal movement led by Premier W. S. Fielding, who had triumphed in the provincial election of 1886 in part, at least, on the issue of a fairer deal for Nova Scotia.

LULLABY

Hush my babes, be still and trusting;
 Sooth your fears and soundly sleep.
 My biggest bubble's almost bursting,
 But soothing Syrup's blessed cheap.

Sleep soft dupes and trust in Tupper;
 Retrenchment's but a naughty dream,
 The sad effect of too much supper,
 He never thought of such a scheme.

Hush, that's not the cars you're hearing:
 'Tis but the mind — you silly pup,
 Longley's only 'electioneering';
 He's tore the cursed Railroad up.

Soft my babes, let music charm you;
 'Quebec Scheme's' a blessed thing;
 Not a Fenian will dare to harm you,
 When under Canada's wing.

Happy days, devoutly wished for!
 Our independence loosly sold!
 Every knave in the place is fished for,
 And your poor dupes, left out (in the) cold.

The *Liverpool Transcript*, March 15, 1867.⁷

LINES SUGGESTED BY THE LEGISLATURE PASSING THE CONFEDERATION RESOLUTION
WITH SUCH HASTE

O that by inspirations light,
I could illumine that fearful night —
Could lift the veil that all might see
That dark deed of iniquity,
By which our Nova Scotia braves
Were sold to Canada as slaves.

A deed too dark for light of day
Nor brightened by moon's pale ray,
Conspired by *** deeply dyed
By sin of selfishness and pride;
The unholy midnight deed they've done
Nor dared they wait the rising sun.

O, that an injured people's ire —
Doubly distilled as liquid fire —
Were poured upon the men so base
As thus their country to disgrace,
Destroy their institutions free
And rob her sons of liberty.

Awake! awake! ye sons of toil,
Once free men on Acadia's soil —
With honest indignation rise
Against the men who you've despised;
Who have abused the power you gave,
To enrich themselves and you enslave.

Oh! Ottawa — thou curse supreme —
The bait, that lured them to the scheme,
Our curse shall ever rest on thee
While Scotia lies beside the sea;
Or while her sons thus stricken roam
To seek in other lands a home.

O! England — glorious, wise, and just,
Hear thou our prayer — in thee we trust;

By power, our Constitution save,
 Which for our good to us thou gave —
 Let us still love and lean on thee
 And loyal, true, and free we'll be.

Acadian Recorder, March 25, 1867.⁸

ANTI LYRICS NO. I

Tho' felon hands have forged a chain,
 In slavery to bind us;
 We yet shall snap the bonds in twain,
 And cast the links behind us.

With lying lips and guileful tongue
 They laboured to enslave us;
 Until those rights from us were wrung,
 Which our forefathers gave us.

Our noble country they would grasp,
 With tyranny enthraling;
 While we in bondage sore must grasp
 Beneath a rule so galling.

To traitors we must bow the knee
 In humble supplication —
 Shall we who lately were so free
 Brook this humiliation?

Forbid it heaven, and all true men
 Endowed with powers of reason!
 No, we must have our own again
 In spite of fraud and treason.

Our cry will reach the mother shore
 Against the violation
 Of all we held so dear of your,
 By this Confederation.

For Britain was by lies deceived
 When she did pass the measure
 That our escutcheon fair defiled
 And robbed us of our treasure.

Born freemen, freemen we will die,
 Part of a glorious nation
 Then let each loyal subject cry
 'Confound Confederation!'

For felon hands may forge a chain
 In slavery to bind us;
 But we will snap their bonds in twain,
 And cast the links behind us.

Fred. (?)

Morning Chronicle, December 24, 1867.^o

ANTI LYRICS No. II

But one short year, and oh the change
 Which darkly shades our country's brow!
 Once free as mountain eagles range
 How low the droop in sadness now!

When dawned the morn of '67,
 Fair and most prosperous was her state,
 No happier country under heaven, —
 Look at her now in '68!

The bright-eyed goddess weeps to see
 Her children humbled in the dust
 Marveling that such things could be
 Such evils wrought by hands accurs'd.

That such a country, such a race
 Could fall so far and sink so low?
 And yet live under the disgrace
 Without one liberating blow.

Deep burns the wound in every breast
 Which freedom warms amongst us all;
 And ne'er can we know peace or rest
 'Til we retrieve our greivous fall.

But whilst we live and hand to hand
 And foot to foot can wage the strife,

We'll battle for our native land
 And yield the struggle but with life.

No tyrants o'er this land may reign,
 Or drag its standard in the dust.
 We'll conquer and our rights maintain
 Because our cause is good and just.

Anon. (Fred. ?)

Morning Chronicle, January 3, 1868.¹⁰

ANTI LYRICS No. III

Among the strange things that we see
 Are *quondam* traitors like McGee,
 Prating to *us* of liberty.
 With him were England's crosses, bars
 Made red with impious wars —
 The gods she worships — Mamon — Mars!

A champion of the rights of man
 He raged and hurled his awful ban
 At Britain's head and off he ran!

We see him next in Yankee land;
 And there he offered heart and hand
 To any who, at his command,

Would simply cross the wide, wide ocean
 And whip proud England; what a notion!
 While he would stay and watch the motion.

None caring to obey his order
 Disgusted D'Arcy crossed the border
 And of himself became recorder.

He told Niagra's waterfall,
 Rivaling its roar with frantic bawl,
 That he would do the deuce and all!

But finding treason would not pay,
 He tried the loyal dodge. Today
 No man so loyal — *so they say*.

THE DALHOUSIE REVIEW

And yet this man — this patriot wight —
 Stands forth mid those, a shining light,
 Who've robbed us of our due birthright.

Though dark and subtle in his mind
 His boast of loyalty can't blind
 Folks eyes to what lurks far behind.

If he could raise a feud betwixt
 England and we, he'd think us fixed;
 For annexation might come next.

Unless indeed he could be king;
 And all his chieftains — not a few —
 Would not come up, great Mac, to you.

Ah, D'Arcy, D'Arcy! many doubt you,
 And think we were as well without you —
 That's why all loyal subjects flout you.

We seek not to be a new nation,
 Nor do we yearn for annexation, —
 Yet anything *but* Federation.

Anon. (Fred. ?)

Morning Chronicle, January 10, 1868.¹¹

THE PETITION TO OTTAWA

Pity the sorrows of some Union men,
 Whose unwise steps have borne them to your door;
 Whose days politically are but a span,
 O give relief! And tax our bread no more.

Those scattered ranks, extremety bespeaks,
 Those Customs locks do justify the Antis fears;
 And many a furrow in our grief worn cheeks
 Has been the channel to a flood of tears.

You have erected on the rising ground,
 With 'miles of cornice', drew me from the road;
 These sinecures a residence have found,
 And grandeur a magnificent abode.

Hard is the fate of fishermen and poor,
 Here as our members voted taxes off our bread,
 Saw Canadians growing corn around their door
 From produce of my farms they shall be fed.

O! take us to your hospitable dome,
 Keen blows the opposition wind and cold;
 Short is our passage to the friendly tomb,
 Our cause is poor and we are badly sold.

Pity the sorrows of poor Union men,
 Whose blinded steps have borne them to your door;
 Whose days politically are but a span,
 O! grant respite and tax our corn no more.

Anon.

Morning Chronicle, January 2, 1868.¹²

THE REPEALER'S SOLILOQUY

Repeal or no Repeal? that is the question;
 Whether 'tis best for us to live in quiet,
 As we are now, a tail end of the great confederation,
 Or to take arms against this unjust union,
 And by our voting end it? To go—secede—
 That's all! And with one voice, united at the poll,
 End all this doubt of what is our intention.

Tis a consummation devoutely to be wished,
 To be— but free once more; perchance a union maritime,
 Aye, there's the rub; for, were we free what good might come,
 When we have shuffled off this Tupper yoke,
 Must make us hopeful. There's the tariff
 That makes calamity of our trade,
 For who would bear the tax on flour, the high price paid.
 Paid for sugar, tea, and soap; the grinding down
 Of the poor man to build monopolies
 And fatten the few rich who own the factories.
 When we could cure all this with reciprocity?

Who would taxation bear, only exist, not live,
 And grovel on in sloth, still sinking deeper in it,
 Day by day? But the dread of being naturalized,
 And loosing our birthright makes us halt,
 And would emigrate to the far west,
 From whose borders few travellers e'er return.
 And so we hesitate, and sickly sentiment
 Makes cowards of us all: So let not now
 Our true, firm resolution be led astray
 By the pale cast of thought the coming fight may offer.
 Great agitation. Soft you, now?
 He comes, — Lord High Commissioner
 Tupper — Arch traitor, — In thy presence
 May our woes be all remembered, and our hearts
 Steeled with the thoughts of cursed '67.

The Daily Acadian Recorder, February 3, 1887.¹⁸

NOTES

1. Most of the standard works on Confederation offer at least a cursory treatment of Nova Scotia's position in the negotiations. Some of the best of the more recent treatments are: P. B. Waite, *The Life and Times of Confederation* (Toronto, 1962), W. L. Morton, *The Critical Years, 1857-1873* (Toronto, 1964). The most thorough and most balanced work available is K. G. Pryke's Ph.D. dissertation, "Nova Scotia and Confederation, 1864-1870" (Duke University, 1962), which will soon be published.
2. The newspaper struggle is partially covered in P. B. Waite, *op. cit.*, but the intensity of that struggle is worth noting. There were at least eight important newspapers in Halifax and another half dozen in the counties. By 1867, all were fully engaged in the debate over Confederation. The two leading journals were the *Halifax Morning Chronicle*, on the side of the antis, and the *Halifax British Colonist*, defending the point of view of the Unionists.
3. See D. A. Muise, "The Federal Election of 1867 in Nova Scotia: An Economic Interpretation", *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society*, Vol. 35, 1968, 327-351. The lone unionist elected was Doctor Charles Tupper, the leading Father of Confederation from Nova Scotia.
4. See Pryke, *op. cit.*, Ch. 5. The "Better Terms" comprised political concessions to the "Antis" and series of financial concessions to the provincial government. For the details see J. A. Maxwell, "Better Terms", *Queen's Quarterly* LX, 1 (Feb., 1933) 125-139.

5. See S. A. Saunders, "The Maritime Provinces and the Reciprocity Treaty of 1854", *Dalhousie Review*, XIV, 3 (Oct., 1934) 355-370.
6. The sentiments were those of Joseph Howe, the president of the Anti-Confederation League. He voiced them at a public meeting in Dartmouth on May 22, 1867. J. H. Chisholm (ed.), *The Speeches and Public Letters of Joseph Howe* (Halifax, 1909) II, 515. For a concise examination of Howe's activities in connection with Confederation see J. M. Beck, *Joseph Howe: Anti-Confederate*, Canadian Historical Association Booklet No. 17 (Ottawa, 1965). A more detailed analysis will be found in R. A. MacLean, "Joseph Howe and British American Union", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1966.
7. Though published in the *Liverpool Transcript*, this short poem seems to reflect more of the concerns of the people of the Annapolis Valley. Avarad Longley was Tupper's Minister of Railroads before Confederation. The reference to "retrenchment" concerns Tupper's election promise of 1863 to lower the expenditure of the province. The "Fenians" were the Irish Americans who were threatening an invasion. Their threats had been used as a lever to force acceptance of union, for defensive purposes, through the Nova Scotia legislature. See P. B. Waite, *op. cit.*, 263-273. The poem is a parody of a popular newspaper advertisement of the day. "Soothing Syrup" was an all-purpose remedy for children's ailments. This poem and those that follow were published without comment or explanation, or any indication of authorship.
8. This poem refers to the resolution introduced into the Nova Scotia Legislature by Charles Tupper on April 10, 1866, and passed one year before the poem was written. Finally accepted at 2 a.m. on April 18, it called for a new conference to consider Colonial Union. The poem reflects the air of conspiracy which surrounded the motion and the still-remaining feeling that Britain would not permit the rights of Nova Scotia to be sold.
9. This poem is much like the preceding in that it looks to the conspiracy theory to explain the actions of the British government. One is also struck by the force of the feeling that Confederation was robbing Nova Scotians of their political freedom.
10. Like *Anti Lyrics No. 1*, this poem urges Nova Scotians to have heart and wait out the storm. The veiled threat of violence cannot be taken too seriously, but the sense of alienation comes through once again with great force.
11. This poem purports to be a chronicle of D'Arcy McGee. McGee, who was assassinated only a few months after this poem was published, was one of the most forceful advocates of union in Central Canada. He had provided a great deal of the pro-Confederation rhetoric for the Fathers of Confederation. It was a common tactic of the antis to attempt to discredit the advocates of union

by reference to their past activities, but it never appeared to be a serious factor in the debate.

12. Like the other poems in this period, *The Petition to Ottawa* reflects the alienation of Nova Scotians from Ottawa and the attempt of the antis to foist the blame for all the ills of Nova Scotia on Confederation. It refers to the petition drawn up by the Nova Scotia Party to be presented to the Spring sitting of the House of Commons in 1868. It called for the release of Nova Scotia from Confederation, but like all the others it was without effect. The imagery that it attempts to conjure up is most interesting, since it reflects the political stance of the antis. If Confederation was to be opposed, the arguments of the Unionists that it would bring prosperity had to be denied.
13. I owe this poem to the interest of Prof. C. I. Miller of McGill University, who brought it to my attention a few years ago. It was written between the provincial election of June, 1886, and the federal general election of February, 1887. The earlier election had seen the triumphant return of W. S. Fielding on the general platform of provincial rights to more federal funds or repeal of Confederation. The success of that campaign and the difficulties that Sir John A. Macdonald's government faced in other parts of the Dominion made the 1887 election a crucial one. Charles Tupper, who had been able to dominate federal politics in Nova Scotia since Confederation, was recalled from his post as Canadian High Commissioner to London to lead the Conservative forces in the election. He was successful. The Conservatives won 14 of 21 seats. A good account of the campaign and the issues may be found in C. Howell, "Repeal, Reciprocity and Commercial Union in Nova Scotian Politics, 1886-1887", unpublished M.A. Thesis, Dalhousie University, 1967.

MOMENT

Alastair Macdonald

The day she died
 a redbreast hopped
 through the open door
 in stilled December,
 inquiring near
 with little confident bounce,
 starting
 my first tear.