A Historic Parallel: Nova Scotia Again a Barrier to New England

By D. C. Harvey

GEOGRAPHY has played a large part in the history of America from its discovery by Columbus and Cabot to the present day, and the current concern over strategic naval and air bases indicates that it will play a large part in the future. So far as North America is concerned geography decided that the most strategic bases for defence against Europe should lie in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, which command the northern trade routes to both Canada and the United States and stand guard at both entrances to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The recent acquisition by the United States of naval and air bases in Newfoundland and the subsequent agreement between Canada and the United States to cooperate in defence of North America have suggested to some that history is repeating itself and that the twentieth century affords an analogy in this respect to the eighteenth. Historical analogies are generally misleading and never exact; but, as this one has a wide appeal at the moment, it seems fitting to examine it carefully and discover how far it holds true.

Though I have headed this article "Nova Scotia again a barrier to New England", I do not consider the two sets of conditions quite parallel. It is true that the geography of North America has remained constant in the past two centuries but political and international relations have changed almost as much as the technique of warfare; yet to Nova Scotians and New Englanders alike the analogy might have seemed complete, when Mayor La Guardia, at the conclusion of a conference of the Canadian-American Joint Defence Board in Boston, stated that "the defence of New England has been removed many miles to the east," thereby implying that Nova Scotia and Newfoundland had again become a barrier to New England as the former, in particular, had been regarded in the eighteenth century.

The most obvious difference between German threats to New England at the moment and French threats in the eighteenth century is the fact that the Germans have no foothold whatever upon this continent and, in attempting to secure one in Newfoundland or Nova Scotia, would have to face the combined opposition of both Canada and the United States, after disposing of the British fleet, whereas the French were strongly entrenched in Quebec and Louisbourg, had a fair chance of gaining supremacy with the aid of local Indian allies, and had been supported by a formidable fleet. There is little doubt, however, that the first step in a German invasion of North America would be to reproduce as far as possible the strategic advantages which the French had in the eighteenth century, and it is in anticipation of such a step that Canada and the United States are remembering their ancient barriers and cooperating to strengthen them.

This cooperation of Canada and the United States in itself suggests another fundamental difference between the two sets of conditions. Today North America, though politically divided between two separate peoples, is united against a common danger and has joint possession and control of all its outposts; but in the eighteenth century North America, as then occupied, was divided against itself and behind the rival French and British colonists were two European mother-countries both of which had intermediate bases of communication and supply between their capitals in America and Europe. However, it was France rather than Great Britain which thought in terms of strategic bases and consciously

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strove to possess them in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, whereas Great Britain pursued a hand-to-mouth imperial policy and was moved to defensive counter-measures only by the urgent insistence of her semi-independent colonies in America. In fact, it was the events of the War of the Austrian Succession which awakened the British to the range and completeness of French designs in America and led them to strengthen the defences of Nova Scotia, both as an imperial outpost and as a barrier to New England.

Nova Scotia was obviously a buffer state between New France and New England in the eighteenth century; but it was not until the third quarter of the seventeenth century that the underlying tendencies of French and British colonial policies began to take shape and to reveal its destiny. By that time the British colonies stretched along the Atlantic seaboard from Virginia to the undefined boundaries of Acadia, while the French occupied Acadia, both banks of the St. Lawrence, and were pushing beyond the Great Lakes to undiscovered lands and furbearing regions. Spurred on by competition from the north, where British traders had established themselves on Hudson Bay and from the south, where other British traders were following Dutch trails to the Iroquois country and beyond, the French discovered the Mississippi, explored the Ohio valley, and gradually conceived the pincer movement by which they hoped to encircle the British colonies and confine them to the Atlantic seaboard.

In this encircling movement Acadia as well as the approaches to the St. Lawrence assume a new importance in French colonial policy, as the left flank of New France must be protected and brought into contact with the New England colonies. Consequently frantic efforts were made to establish convenient overland routes of communication between New France and Acadia, to win the favor of the Indian tribes along those routes, and to take effective possession of the continental part of Acadia as the Atlantic frontier of New France. Thus would the circle be complete and the peninsular part of Acadia cut off from the New Englanders, who were monopolizing its trade and exploiting its fisheries almost as completely as they had done during the long period of British occupation from 1654 to 1670. At the same time headquarters of the commandants or lieutenant-governors of Acadia were shifted from Pentagoet, to Port Royal, or to a fort on the St. John River, as circumstances demanded, and the Sedentary Fishing Company of Acadia, which was given a monopoly of the fisheries on the coasts of Acadia with headquarters at Chedabucto, was encouraged to drive the New Englanders away from Canso, while from time to time ships of war were sent from France to Acadia or to New France with instructions to call at their intermediate base of Placentia in Newfoundland on both their outward and homeward voyages.

Such was the tentative set-up in the latter part of the seventeenth century and the first decade of the eighteenth century. Its main outlines were modified only slightly by Queen Anne's War, which gave nominal control of Acadia to the English, compelled the French to withdraw from Placentia, but allowed them to defend the approaches of the St. Lawrence by the erection of fortifications in Cape Breton Island.

It is apparent from the correspondence of the French officials and their feverish anxiety to reconquer Acadia before the Treaty of Utrecht that they saw the necessity of some naval base near the entrance of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, not only for protection of their fisheries but also for the ultimate defence of Canada. Writing to the Governor and Intendant of New France in June 1712, the French Minister expressed the fear that they would have to surrender Placentia and Acadia, and argued that if the fisheries were to be continued with any degree of security they would have to set up an establishment at Cape Breton or Labrador. Again, in a memorandum in answer to the British suggestion that Cape Breton Island be held by joint occupation, the French plenipotentiaries pointed out that such an arrangement

would not preserve the peace, and added the following significant paragraph: "But there is still a stronger reason against this proposition, as 'tis but too often seen that the most amicable nations many times become enemies, it is prudence in the King to reserve to himself the possession of the only isle which will hereafter open an entrance into the river of St. Lawrence; it would be absolutely shut to the ships of His Majesty, if the English, masters of Acadia and Newfoundland still possessed the Isle of Cape Breton in common with the French and *Canada would be lost to France* as soon as the war should be renewed between the two nations, which God forbid, but the most secure means to prevent it, is often to think that it may come to pass."

By the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) the French agreed to give up all claim to Hudson Bay, Newfoundland and Acadia or Nova Scotia if allowed to retain exclusive control of Cape Breton Island and the other islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and, thus, seemed content to limit their ambitions on the Atlantic seaboard to the security of their trade routes with Canada by the gulf and river St. Lawrence. They even consented that their fishermen should be excluded from the southern coasts of Nova Scotia and allowed to dry their fish on the northern part of Newfoundland only, from Cape Bonavista on the east to Point Riche on the west, thereby eliminating a major source of conflict with New England and Great Britain. By the same treaty both powers agreed that they would refrain from molesting or restraining the trade of the Indian subjects or allies of the other, and that all French subjects of Acadia and Placentia who did not leave these colonies within a year were to take the oath of allegiance and become British subjects.

If, as the preamble of the treaty declared, the two powers had been anxious for "universal peace and true and sincere friendship", these arrangements should have contributed to that end, and allowed the two empires to develop side by side without conflict; but, as the boundaries of Acadia or Nova Scotia and of the Indian allies or subjects were left to future definition by diplomacy, it soon became apparent that future conflict was inevitable. Instead of recognizing Nova Scotia as the most northerly of the British colonies the French continued to treat it as the eastern wing of New France, and tried to retain the trade of the Acadians and maintain them in allegiance to King Louis by encouraging them to refuse the oath of allegiance to King George. At the same time they incited their Indian allies on the borders of New England to prevent the northward advance of British settlement, at Canso to hamper the British fisheries, and throughout Acadia to confine the British to the southern part of the peninsula.

It was under these circumstances that New England, which had not yet considered Nova Scotia as a field of colonization but was concerned with its trade and fisheries only, came to regard it as a barrier against French aggression and, when the War of the Austrian Succession spread to America, sent aid to the much-neglected British garrison at Annapolis Royal in the hope of keeping the barrier in British hands and the war away from its own shores. For the same reason it promoted and, with the aid of the British fleet, carried out a successful expedition against Louisbourg in 1745, and thereafter advocated an aggressive policy of anglicization and defence for the colony.

During this war the French had shown clearly by the sudden attack upon Canso, the repeated attacks on Annapolis Royal, the expedition to Chignecto and Grand Pre, and the naval armada of D'Anville, that both New and Old France were bent upon the reconquest of Acadia as part of their policy of encirclement; while the sojourn of D'Anville's armada in Chebucto Harbor had emphasized the importance which they attached to that harbor as a strategic naval base for a frontal attack upon the British colonies. Hence the insistence of New England and New York that the British government should fortify that harbor as a strategic naval base for the defence of those colonies, especially after it had restored Louisbourg to the French in

that uneasy truce known as the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle; and the energetic response of the British government in the founding of Halifax and the formulation of a policy for the effective occupation of Nova Scotia. Hence, also, the French seizure of the Isthmus of Chignecto, their fortification of Beausejour and Gaspereau, their intrigues with the Indians on the St. John and Shubenacadie, in a final attempt to make north-western Nova Scotia the south-eastern boundary of New France and to confine the British to the Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia.

Such were the alignments on the Atlantic seaboard and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence on the eve of the final struggle for supremacy. The British were in control of Newfoundland, of Halifax and Annapolis Royal in south-western Nova Scotia and faced the French on the Isthmus of Chignecto. The French controlled Cape Breton Island by the fortress of Louisbourg, held the most commanding fort on the Isthmus at Chignecto, had a base of communication and supply begween Quebec, Beausejour and Louisbourg at Fort Gaspereau on Bay Verte, and were attempting with the aid of the Indians to establish a post at the mouth of the St. John River. No one could have foretold the issue; but it was clear that for the moment the defence of New England on the Atlantic seaboard had been "removed many miles to the east." In this respect, therefore, though Newfoundland played a minor part in the Seven Years' War, Mayor La Guardia's analogy holds true today, despite the different political and international conditions and methods of warfare.

The biggest political change that followed the British victory in the Seven Years' War was the American Revolution, which has been described happily as the "triumph of British freedom on the soil of America" but united all the original British colonies except Newfoundland into an independent nation, and left to the British Empire only those which had been originally founded by the French. The latter, in turn, having discovered the formula of liberty within the British Empire, united in the Dominion of Canada and like the United States expanded to the western sea. These two American nations have taken the place of the old European rivals and, as neighbours rather than enemies, are pooling their defensive resources against a new menace from Europe; and Canada, though poorer in man-power and wealth, is richer in defensive bases under modern conditions of warfare, because of its geographical situation and its position in the British Commonwealth, both of which make Newfoundland of the utmost importance.

In the eighteenth century North America fell to those who possessed preponderance of both man-power and sea-power. Its future defence must reckon with air-power; but as an enemy from Europe has to get command of both sea and air before he can use his man-power, its first defence must rest on its most advanced naval and air bases. Hence the paramount importance of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia for the United States as well as for Canada and Great Britain. Regardless, therefore, of political and international changes, and changes in modes of warfare, the defence of New England again leans heavily upon British barriers; but in this instance the United States rather than Great Britain is assuming the major responsibility for strengthening its most advanced barrier, while lending material aid to British naval and air forces in order that none of those barriers may be reached. At the same time Canada, as a North American nation and a member of the British Commonwealth, is strengthening its own barriers and cooperating with both the United States and Great Britain in the wider defensive arrangements.

For all this it appears that no historical analogy, however attractive, or carefully stated, can be exact. Perhaps it would be better to emulate Prime Minister Churchill in avoiding exact definition, and to say that in the future, *as in the past*, "the British Empire and the United States will have to be somewhat mixed up together in some of their affairs for mutual and general advantage."