

Prologue

[Confederation will be] an event which will make us
historical—not with my will would another person take my place.
John A. Macdonald to Governor General Lord Monck, June 26, 1866

In the year 1867, three countries underwent transformational change. In Japan, a new emperor initiated the Meiji Restoration to turn a feudal society into a modern industrial power. In Germany, twenty-two northern states led by Prussia formed themselves into a North German Federation, which its chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, would soon unify with southern German states to form a new German Empire. And on July 1, a handful of British colonies in the northeast corner of North America reorganized themselves into a confederation.

The objective of these colonies—Ontario and Quebec emerging from the preceding United Province of Canada, with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick joining them—was by far the least ambitious of the three. Confederation's prime purpose was to enable the people above the border with the United States to continue being what they already were—British North Americans—rather than becoming Americans. As a secondary

goal, far less widely accepted, the exercise aimed to develop a “new nationality” for those living in the Dominion of Canada.

While modest, Canada’s ambitions may well have been the most difficult to fulfill. The new dominion had little of the stuff of which nation-states are customarily made. Canada lay next door to an overwhelming neighbour, and it was difficult to distinguish its inhabitants, French Canadians excepted, from those to the south. Its own people knew almost nothing about each other: Maritimers had always looked eastwards back to Britain or southwards to the rich New England market; and the populations of Ontario and Quebec were separated by profound differences in language, ethnicity and religion. The harsh winters and the vast distances between settlements isolated Canadians even further from each other. The country itself was more a stretched out subcontinent than a country; the American journalist Horace Greeley got it right when he called it “an eel-skin of settled country”—one composed of widely scattered towns and pioneer farms in clearings hacked out of primeval forests, with almost all these fragments of civilization huddled against a border that was arbitrary and invisible.

In no respect was the Canada created by Confederation a nation-state. It was still a British colony, with no say whatever in its foreign affairs. It possessed less autonomy than little-developed states such as Haiti or Liberia. Rather than a nation, it was a patchwork quilt of three nations, English, French and Aboriginal. Nor did it fulfill the customary purpose of a nation—to enable a distinctive ethnic group to take its place on the international stage. Robert MacNeil, the long-time public affairs host of PBS television, once observed that his native Canada was not an “inevitable nation”—unlike Denmark, for instance, which provides a homeland for Danish people, or Japan for the Japanese. Inevitably, the attempt to create a new Canadian nationality would have to be quietly abandoned.

Canada's very existence constituted a denial of geography, demography and commerce. Compared to the United States—Canadians engaged in such comparisons incessantly—the country was poor, provincial, underdeveloped and almost entirely lacking life's pleasantries (except in some quarters in Montreal and in the care and pride with which the people built their churches). The British parliamentarian Charles Dilke, who visited in 1869, wrote that “a fog of unenterprise hung over the land: roads were wanting, houses rude, swamps undrained, plains untilled.” Many of its best and brightest inhabitants moved to the United States, while the immigrants it needed so desperately either went to America directly or came to Canada, saw what was on offer and left.

Soon after Confederation, the *Times* of London took a look at Canada and winced. The newspaper doubted that Canada could survive, because it lacked “the body, the vital organs, the circulation and the muscular force that are to give adequate power to these wide-spread limbs.” The analysis of the *New York Times* was similar but for its triumphant tone: “When the experiment of the ‘Dominion’ shall have failed, as fail it must, a process of peaceful absorption will give Canada her proper place in the Great North American republic.”

In both Britain and the United States, the prevailing judgment among the small number of those reasonably well informed on the matter was that the new confederation would quickly vanish—by joining its neighbour. That merger would greatly improve the standard of living of most Canadians, and it could be done easily, in two short steps: first independence, then annexation. As for the first, many in the Mother Country wished Canada would leave the nest, to end the risk of a British-American conflict initiated by some border incident. Lord Monck, who as governor general had played a critical part in achieving Confederation, thought this way, and on his return home to England told the House of Lords

that it was “in the interests of the Mother Country that [Canada] should be taught to look forward to independence.” Once that was achieved, all Canada needed to do was knock on the right door in Washington, where many of the most powerful men—including President Andrew Johnson, Secretary of State William Seward and Charles Sumner, chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations—were annexationists.

In both countries, informed opinion agreed. In Britain, a few months before Confederation, the Oxford history professor and influential commentator Goldwin Smith forecast that the “British North American colonies will in time, and probably at no very distant time, unite themselves politically with [the United States] of which they are already by race, position, commercial ties and the characteristics of their institutions a part.” On Confederation’s eve, the prominent U.S. historian George Bancroft advised Seward that Canada would soon “break into parts & follow the strong attraction of the immensely massive weight of the United States.”

Instead, Canada followed its own version of manifest destiny. This choice, illogical though it may have seemed, was the product of two causes. The first was that the great majority of Canadians, for reasons often opaque, but ranging from loyalty, to a conviction of cultural superiority, to pleasure in belonging to the world’s greatest empire, were determined not to become Americans. The other was that the man who led them at this time happened to be Sir John A. Macdonald. Among all the ablest nineteenth-century democratic leaders, including Lincoln, Disraeli and Gladstone, he was one of the most skilled and most experienced, and probably the most wily. He was also exceptionally determined, whether in pursuit of his country’s interests or of his own. What follows is Sir John A.’s story to its end, and Canada’s at its beginning.