

Thomas D'Arcy McGee and Confederation in the Maritimes

by
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Canada as a nation owes its existence to a number of incidents. At the time of their happening they seemed to be of minor importance. They were little incidents, such as the visits of Thomas D'Arcy McGee to the Maritimes, the result of which was the winning of these Provinces to Confederation.

The winning of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia to the confederation scheme was all-important. These Provinces held the key to nationhood, since only through them could the pathway by sea to the Mother country be kept open all the year round. A nation without this pathway would have been impossible.

The important part played by McGee in bringing these Provinces into line has been largely overlooked by history. Certainly it has not been emphasized.

It is the purpose of this paper to show how important was the part he played in bringing these Provinces into a union with the two Provinces of Canada. The adhesion of these Maritime Provinces to the scheme laid the foundation of the present Canadian nation.

McGee was active in the Maritimes for five years prior to the Quebec and London conferences. He not only visited these Provinces frequently, but he also arranged opportunities for the public men of the lower Provinces to meet with their counterparts in the Canadas. This was his great contribution to the welding of the different colonies and was, in retrospect, perhaps the most important work that was done by any one individual to bring about Confederation.

It is possible that McGee was the first among Canadian statesmen to see the importance of winning the Maritimes, if a federation of the British North American colonies was to become a reality. There is no question about the fact that he was the first Canadian to make any constructive effort to bring these Provinces into line. Early in his political career in Canada he saw the necessity for union, if the colonies were to remain free from the domination of the United States and retain their British character and, more important to him, their British institutions. Many of his contemporaries, in the two Canadian provinces, foresaw only a union of their own provinces. McGee's

vision was greater than theirs for he was able to see the essentials of a great nation, if the union could embrace all the British colonies in North America. He also realized that New Brunswick and Nova Scotia were the key to the scheme and he determined to see to it that they were brought into the union. He therefore took steps to visit the Maritimes in order that he might tell the people of these Provinces of the scheme and of its great possibilities.

The idea of a union of the British American colonies into a great new nation was a cause that appealed to McGee's imagination. He was intrigued and fascinated by the possibilities of such a union. From his very first entrance into Canadian politics, until the day he so tragically died, he never ceased to speak and write of his great new nation of the North.

His early political training, while a young man in Ireland, fitted him for the work. He had been associated with the famous Irishman Charles Gavan Duffy in the formation of the ill-starred Irish confederation of 1847. The knowledge gained at that time from the study of federal systems gave him, more clearly than his associates, a fuller understanding of what confederation could accomplish in uniting the scattered British provinces. He also had a further advantage over his associates in that he had lived under a federal system while a resident of the United States. He knew the weakness of the various federal systems and particularly did he understand the weakness of the United States federation. There he saw, as did most statesmen of the time, that the grave weakness of the American system lay in the division of the powers between the State and federal authority.

The American system provided that all powers not specifically assigned to the federal authority remained vested in the states. This made the central authority weak and was to be the direct cause of the war between the states between 1861-1865.

McGee was a proponent of a federation in Canada in which all powers not specifically assigned should be vested in the central authority. Thus the central authority would be strong and the frictions that had developed in the United States would be avoided.

The legislative union, under which the two Canadas were governed when McGee first entered the assembly in 1857, was most unsatisfactory. It was apparent to all that some new scheme would have to be devised. There were many different viewpoints about the form that that scheme should take. Differences of religion, of law, of language and of temperament in the two Canadas generated tensions and begot jealousies. Each province had minority problems which were difficult to keep in check. The legislative union between these two had been an uneasy one from its very inception. Now, in 1857, it was about to break up.

In the Maritimes there was also talk of change. The scattered populations of the four Atlantic provinces were not satisfied with their economic progress and discussions of some kind of union among themselves

were frequently held. The provinces of Canada were remote from them. They knew little of the country or its people. Never at any time was union with the provinces of Canada seriously discussed. A Legislative Union among themselves, a Customs Union, but never the greater union. It was into this virgin territory that McGee brought his idea for the great Northern nation.

McGee's great political ability had received recognition in the Canadian Assembly and by 1860 he had become a cabinet minister.

Armed with the prestige of his new office McGee made the first of his many trips to the Maritimes. While in these Provinces he made numerous speeches on the subject of Union. He sought out and became acquainted with the public men of the different provinces and wherever he spoke and to whomever he talked, he told of his dream of union and of the great advantages the Union would be to all. He learned, while in the Maritimes, the desire of the people for railways and he quickly saw that if a Union was to be accomplished, a railway must be built linking the Maritimes with the Canadas. He adopted this plan at once and from many platforms demonstrated the great promise that the building of the railway and the union of the provinces would bring about. After his 1860 trip to the Maritimes, the building of the railway and the union became inseparable in his mind and in his speeches. The Union and the railway were to him one and the same thing. Many of his speeches made on the subject of the union during the years 1861-1865 were published by Chapman and Hall in London in 1865, and many of the statements here made have been drawn from this source.

McGee was the first top ranking political figure from the Canadas to visit the Maritimes. Travel of any kind between the Canadas and the Maritimes was very rare because it was very difficult. He was welcomed with open arms and his generosity in speaking for any charitable cause was appreciated by all and incidentally assured for him a good audience. His personal charm as well as his oratorical ability won for him many friends. Among the public figures he met and became friendly with were Tupper, Howe, Johnson, Tilley, Wilmot, and Anglin. On his first visit he also met Archbishop Connolly of Halifax who was to remain his friend, counsellor, admirer and defender for the remainder of his life.

He returned to the Maritimes annually during the summers of 1861-1864. He was in great demand as a lecturer and as the Civil War in the United States continued, he added the necessity, of union for defense to the other strong arguments he had been advancing. In August 1863, at the Mechanics' Institute in Saint John, in a speech made for the benefit of a Volunteer company, he expounded this theme at length and also pointed out the value of the proposed intercolonial railway in the defence of British North America. This speech is among those published in the London collection to which reference has already been made.

McGee enjoyed his visits to the Maritimes. He had relatives in Saint John whom he visited. He had many other friends amongst the Irish population of the provinces. Many of the people of Irish birth who had settled in these provinces had come there on his advice. He had made several trips to Ireland and had taken the occasion while there to warn his Irish neighbors intending to emigrate to stay away from the United States. He told the Irish about the provinces of Canada and about the Maritimes. His efforts to found settlements in Canada West had been misunderstood and opposed. He saw in the Maritimes a country ideally suited to Irish immigration. The Irish were an agricultural people. The Maritimes were a farming country. The characteristics of the country resembled Ireland. Above all, the greatest attraction he felt the Maritimes held for the Irish was the possibility of establishing village communities, such as at home in Ireland and in Canada East; there the Church was the center of the community and there the people could practice the Faith of their fathers in peace and contentment. Many such communities, established in those days under the aegis of the Irish prelates, Bishop Sweeney of Saint John and Archbishop Connolly of Halifax and with the help of McGee are still in existence, their Catholicity as strong as it was when the founders of those villages came out with their great faith from the old land. Petersville, Johnville, Rexton – all in New Brunswick – are examples of these communities.

Life in these villages was so different from the life led by the emigrants who went to the big cities on the United States seaboard, where the Irish farm people were crowded into teeming slums and exploited in the cotton mills, in the railway work gangs and in the sweat shops of the clothing trade. Worst of all they were exploited politically and because of the exploitation often parted with the great faith that they had brought with them from the old land. McGee was happy to visit the Irish communities in the Maritimes and many a friend from across the sea got a real thrill when on opening the door of his home he found standing on the doorstep the man whose oratory and advice had sent him to British America.

McGee, on his visits to the Maritimes, was profoundly impressed with the caliber of men he found holding office in these provinces. He saw them to be equal in mental stature to any public men he had ever met. He knew the value of men like this to the new nation that he envisaged and he pointed out to these men the destiny that could be theirs. On September 18, 1862, at Port Robinson, Canada West, he spoke at a political picnic which was attended by Joseph Howe, then premier of Nova Scotia, and by Hon. Peter Mitchell of New Brunswick, who were in Canada at his invitation. At that time he commented on the “statesmanlike, broad-principled and high spirited speech of the Premier of Nova Scotia and he had heard the fervent, animated and manly sentiments expressed by his friend, Mr. Mitchell of New Brunswick.” Both of these men had just concluded speaking on the question of Union.

In July 1863, McGee made a major speech to the people of Nova Scotia in the Temperance Hall at Halifax. At that time he said that there were so many arguments for the union that in speaking he must be selective.

He then proceeded to speak and to develop four main points. First the argument from “association,” second, the “commercial argument,” third, the “immigration argument” and fourth, the “patriotic argument.” The concluding passage of this address, gives us a typical example of his oratory at this time.

I have endeavoured to treat the subject wholly without allusion to party or local distinctions. In the presence of the great subject, as I contemplate it, the lines of party are effaced and disappear. I endeavour to contemplate it in the light of a future possible, probable, and I hope to live to be able to say, *positive* British American Nationality. For I repeat in the terms of the question that I asked at first, what do we need to construct such a nationality? Territory, resources by sea and land, civil and religious freedom: these we already have. Four millions we already are – four millions culled from the races that for a thousand years have led the van of Christendom. When the sceptre of Christian civilization trembled in the enervate grasp of the Greeks of the lower Empire, then the western tribes of Europe, fiery, hirsute, clamorous, but kindly, snatched at the falling prize and placed themselves at the head of human affairs.

We are the children of these fire-tried kingdom-founders, of these ocean discoverers of Western Europe. Analyse our aggregate population; we have more Saxons than Alfred had when he founded the English realm; we have more Celts than Brian had when he put his heel on the neck of Odin; we have more Normans than William had when he marshalled his invading host along the strand of Falaise. We have the laws of St. Edward and St. Louis; Magna Charters and the Roman Code; we speak the speeches of Shakespeare and Bossuet; we copy the constitution for which Burke and Somers and Sidney and Sir Thomas More lived or died to secure or save. Out of these august elements, in the name of the future generations who shall inhabit all the vast regions we now call ours, I invoke the fortunate genius of an United British America, to solemnize law with the moral sanctions of religion, and to crown the fair pillar of our freedom with its only appropriate capital, lawful authority, so that, hand in hand, we and our descendants may advance steadily to the accomplishment of a common destiny.

McGee spent three weeks in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia and spoke many times elaborating the sentiments just quoted. He made great progress in his appointed task and left with the people who heard him a desire to see the Union of which he so eloquently spoke, brought to a conclusion.

In 1864, the Boards of Trade of Halifax and Saint John issued an invitation to the members of the Legislative Assembly of Canada to come down to visit them. The invitation was refused on the grounds that they were

too busy with their legislative duties. The refusal was taken very badly in Halifax and Saint John. It was felt that the Canadians were refusing because they did not think it worth while to make the effort to visit their supposedly poor relations. The refusal just about wrecked the scheme for union. The action that was then taken by D'Arcy McGee was probably the most decisive of any ever taken by him. Certainly, it was the greatest contribution made by any public man of the time. He was greatly worried over the turn of events and went to his friend James Ferrier to discuss what could be done to heal the breach. Mr. Ferrier besides being a member of the Legislative Council was also a director of the Grand Trunk. Mr. Ferrier prevailed upon his fellow directors of the Railway to issue an invitation to the members of both Houses and to the Canadian press to make the trip over their lines to Portland, Maine, and thence on to Saint John by sea. On August 2, 1864, the party left Montreal. It consisted of forty members of the Legislative Assembly, twenty-five members of the Legislative Council and forty more who represented the press and business. McGee was the only member of the Cabinet to make the trip.

The party travelled to Portland in day coaches and since it was hot August weather, they suffered accordingly. Their sufferings on the train trip were nothing to what they were to suffer on the trip up the coast and through the Bay of Fundy. Accommodations on the boat were so meagre that many of the travellers were forced to take mattresses to the deck where they suffered the pangs of seasickness and the cold ocean air. They were a pretty discouraged and unhappy group when at last they landed at Saint John. But the warmth of their welcome in that hospitable city more than made up for the discomforts of the voyage. The visitors were welcomed everywhere. It was the first time that any large number of Canadians had visited the seaside provinces and the first time too that any large group from one British American province had the opportunity to see and observe the other. McGee had often said that if the peoples of the British Colonies had a chance for social intercourse, all opposition to the union scheme would disappear. Here was the opportunity that he wished for and full advantage was taken of it. The party spent five days in New Brunswick and a week in Nova Scotia before returning to Montreal.

Too much importance cannot be attached to the results of this visit, and its arrangement by McGee was the greatest contribution made by anyone to the final result of the negotiations: the confederation of the provinces. It was the turning point and from this point on, real progress was made.

The Charlottetown conference followed in September and the Quebec conference in October. At both of these McGee played an important part. He was the liaison man between both groups. His standing in the Canadian Assembly and his frequent trips to the Maritimes made him well known to both groups. No verbatim reports have been kept of the Charlottetown or

Quebec conferences. Hence it is difficult to assess the part played by any one individual. This however we do know, that it was McGee who persuaded his Maritime friends at Charlottetown to accept the invitation of the Canadians to the Quebec conference and thus made that meeting possible. We also know that his stand at Quebec on the rights of minorities and separate schools was one of the reasons that MacDonald kept him from the subsequent London conference; MacDonald feared that his uncompromising stand on these questions might make an agreement with the delegates from Canada West impossible. Later, McGee did go to London and was able to join his confrères there for the festivities that followed the conference proper.

McGee returned to Canada after a visit to Ireland and France. He arrived in Canada as MacDonald was forming his cabinet only to find that his position was in danger. MacDonald had bowed to the demands of Cartier for a representation of three French-speaking members from lower Canada in the cabinet, and since Alexander Galt was to represent the English-speaking minority, this left no room for McGee. A conference between McGee and Cartier did nothing to resolve the difficulty. McGee's Maritime friends stepped in with a solution. This was that Charles Tupper of Nova Scotia, whose position was secure, should step aside with McGee and that both their places should be taken by Edward Kenny, an Irish Catholic from Halifax. Thus Nova Scotia and the Irish Catholic representation would be satisfied. McGee with great reluctance, agreed to this compromise.

His health had become impaired partly as a result of his worry over his position in public life. While he was able to attend the opening of Canada's first Parliament, he did not take any part in its deliberations until he assumed his seat as a private member in March, 1868.

On April 6, 1868, McGee rose in his seat to make a major speech. Again it was the Maritimes that was his inspiration.

A considerable unrest was prevalent in Nova Scotia over the terms of Union, and the way in which the Province had been hastened into the union. Tupper was being severely criticized for taking the Province into the union without a vote of the people. Joseph Howe, Tupper's great adversary, was in London demanding that the Province be allowed to withdraw. The situation in the Province was tense. It was in an effort to quiet this atmosphere that McGee rose to speak. He defended Tupper and explained his actions. He warned against provincialism in the new nation, and he pointed out that if better terms were needed in Nova Scotia, unquestionably better terms would be arranged. His speech was meant to allay the fears of a province that he, more than any other, was responsible for persuading to join the union. The speech was a masterpiece delivered with a logic and forcefulness that only a master could produce. A few paragraphs from it will serve to illustrate the character and force of the whole oration:

The debates of the House of Commons of April 6, 1868 record it in part

as follows:

Our friend in Nova Scotia, Sirs, need have no fear but that Confederation will ever be administered with serene and even justice. To its whole history, from its earliest inception to its final triumphant consummation, no stigma can be attached, no stain attributed. The single aim from the beginning has been to consolidate the extent of British North America with the utmost regard to the independent power and privileges of each Province and I, Sirs, who have been and still am, its warmest advocate, speak here not as a representative of any race or of any province but as thoroughly and emphatically a Canadian, ready and bound to recognize the claim of my fellow Canadian subjects from the farthest east to the farthest west, equally as those of my nearest neighbor or the friend who proposed me on the hustings.

It was McGee's last speech. A speech which reaffirmed his promise to the Maritimes that he would at all times defend their interests in the confederation. Shortly after its delivery McGee was dead at the hands of an assassin ... shot down in cold blood by a pistol held close to his head as he entered the doorway of the house in which he was staying. Great grief filled the land at the passing of the great nation-builder. The Maritimes shared in this grief because of their very close association with him. His friend, Archbishop Connolly, said a funeral Mass in Halifax at the same time that the funeral itself was taking place in Montreal. The venerable Archbishop personally preached the eulogy and in it he paid great tribute to McGee as a politician, as a statesman, as a friend and above all as a great Catholic and fine example of the Irish in Canada.

Thus passed from the scene this great Canadian. McGee by his vision saw the possibilities of nationhood for the scattered provinces. He saw that the Maritimes were an essential key to this unity. He, by his work and labor, did more than any other man to bring the Maritimes into the Union. By so doing, his contribution to Confederation was greater than any other.