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Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation, 1837–67

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Preface

'A book that needs apologies ought never to have been written.'¹ William Howard Russell's bold statement is a warning to authors who attempt to explain themselves in prefaces. The present study has passed through several incarnations and — perhaps more fruitfully — lengthy hibernations. The research upon which it is based has been supported successively by the British taxpayer (whose contribution to the funding of doctoral dissertations is too rarely acknowledged), then by research fellowships at Magdalene College, Cambridge and at the Australian National University in Canberra, followed by appointments as Lecturer in Modern History at University College, Cork and as Director of the Centre of Canadian Studies at the University of Edinburgh. I acknowledge with gratitude the support of them all, and thank in particular the Foundation for Canadian Studies in the United Kingdom, both for generous financial support to the Edinburgh Centre, and specifically for making it possible for me to take study leave for part of 1993 to complete this book. The Centre of Canadian Studies at Edinburgh has also enjoyed the support of various programmes of the Government of Canada, through the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Canadian High Commission in London.

Over the quarter century, I have been helped by many people, not only in this research, but in my development as a historian and in the securing of my career. Most of these obligations of gratitude are of a private nature, and the one most important and necessary of them all, very deeply so. Prefaces should not be used to list one's friends in order of preference, and I intend to repeat my thanks to those who have helped me, personally and in private. Here I record appreciation to a small number among many friends and colleagues for immediate and direct support in the writing of this book: Don Beer, Phillip Buckner, Tony Cohen, Ronald Hyam,

Anthony Low, R. Peter Milroy, Barry Smith and Jim Sturgis. I thank also The Macmillan Press Limited for guidance in the production of this book, and the University of British Columbia Press for advice.

Thanks are gratefully expressed to the many Archives and Libraries acknowledged in my Notes. I thank all the copyright-holders of the various manuscript collections which I have been privileged to consult and to cite. Material from the Royal Archives is quoted by gracious permission of Her Majesty The Queen. All Crown-copyright material in the Public Record Office is published by permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. I thank in particular Viscount Cobbold, the Earl of Clarendon, the Earl of Derby and the Trustees of the Broadlands Archive.

Over the years, I have published various articles and essays on British attitudes towards the future of British North America. While the present study represents a re-working of all earlier material, I have drawn upon previous publications, and again acknowledge with thanks the prehistory and provenance. Some essays have been published under the Macmillan imprint. 'An Imperial Idea and its Friends' appeared in 1986 in *Studies in British Imperial History: Essays in Honour of A.P. Thornton*, edited (with great forbearance) by Gordon Martel. "'Anti-imperialism" in the Mid-Nineteenth Century and the Nature of the British Empire' was published in 1975 in *Reappraisals in British Imperial History*, written jointly with Ronald Hyam. *History As Science or Literature: Explaining Canadian Confederation, 1858-1867* was published in 1989 in the Canada House Lecture series. I am indebted to the Academic Relations Officer, Michael J. Hellyer, for the invitation to speak, and to the Canadian Studies Projects Officer, Vivien Hughes, for the production of the text, and for much support and many kindnesses on the part of the Canadian High Commission in London. The Trustees of the Winthrop Pickard Bell Fund at Mount Allison University kindly invited me to contribute to their hospitable and prestigious lecture series in 1991, and the editorial labour of Terry Craig resulted in the publication of my contribution as *Faction and Fiction in Canada's Great Coalition of 1864* in 1993, from a revised text. One paper has enjoyed a promiscuous life unmerited by its own worth. In 1990, Acadiensis Press published 'The Case against Canadian Confederation, 1864-1867', as part of *The Causes of Canadian Confederation*, formally under my own editorship but actually owing much to the work of Phillip Buckner. Two other

versions have appeared. One was in the 1990 collection, *From Rebellion to Patriation: Canada and Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, edited for the Canadian Studies in Wales Group by Colin Eldridge. The other version is in T.J. Barron et al. (eds), *Constitutions and National Identity*, published by Quadriga in 1993 as a tribute to G.A. Shepperson. I have also drawn upon four journal articles. 'Launching Canadian Confederation, 1837-1864' appeared in the *Historical Journal*, xxvii (1984). 'Confederation Rejected: the British Debate on Canada, 1837-1840' was published in volume xi (1982) of the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*. The *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, ii (1987), published 'Britain and the Future of British North America, 1841-1850'. 'Some Lost Confederation Initiatives, 1846-1857' appeared in its forerunner, the *Bulletin of Canadian Studies*, edited by the late Philip Wigley, in volume vi, 1983. I thank all these publishers and publications.

I am grateful to Drummond Street Reprographics for drawing the map, and to ASET for producing camera-ready copy.

The presentation of this study follows the recent trend of avoiding unnecessary capitalisation. Terms such as 'governor-general' and 'colonial secretary' were themselves shorthand versions of more complicated formal titles while, technically speaking, the office of 'prime minister' did not even exist in the nineteenth century. The Queen's representatives in the Maritime provinces were officially 'lieutenant-governors', acting on behalf of the Captain General and Governor-in-Chief based in Canada: I have referred to them throughout as 'governors'. Capitalisation has been used to indicate affiliation with formally constituted parties, such as 'Conservative', 'Bleu' or 'Whig', but the lower case to refer to looser political attitudes, such as 'tory' and 'radical'.

I have written out in full the abbreviations which Victorians sometimes used in their private correspondence but otherwise quotations have been rendered in their contemporary spelling and punctuation, avoiding the intrusive and superior '[sic]' as far as possible. The people who exercised political power in London in the mid-nineteenth century were under the impression that they were running a country called 'England'. For the purposes of the argument advanced in these pages, it is necessary to interpret 'England' and 'English' in quotations as meaning 'Britain' and 'British'. I have refrained from intruding correction except in one bizarre statement which claimed Glasgow for the southern

kingdom. I have, however, found it impossible to escape from one aspect of Victorian political incorrectness. All the governors, every colonial secretary, each and every legislator and at the very least the vast majority of editorial commentators were male. The shrewd comments of Frances Monck, even the pertinent queries of Queen Victoria, not an acclaimed intellectual figure, are enough to confirm that the nineteenth century wasted a vast amount of talent through segregation of gender roles. None the less, that is how mid-nineteenth century politics operated, and if I have sometimes slipped into the language of a masculine debate, I can only plead fidelity to the original.

'Reader, I think proper, before we proceed any farther together, to acquaint thee that I intend to digress through this whole history as often as I see occasion'.² It is tempting to continue this splendid quotation from Fielding with even stronger endorsement, but I content myself with warning that this book is also discursive. Since 1983, my career as a historian has been pursued in the cross-disciplinary framework of Canadian Studies. Some of my most productive teaching — to me, at any rate — has been at first-year level, introducing undergraduates who were resolutely not historians to the ways in which my craft might help them to understand Canada. I have gained immeasurably from the pleasure and the stimulus of participation in an interdisciplinary academic community — especially through the British Association for Canadian Studies. In this atmosphere I found myself thinking about history as well as about Canada, and this will explain some of the more irritating ruminations in this book. I thank all my friends in BACS, while to the International Council for Canadian Studies gratitude is owed both for the promotion of a world-wide community of scholarship and for deeply valued recognition of my own work at a time of discouragement.

I offer one further excursion into the prefaces of yesteryear. 'I cannot claim that this book meets any conspicuous need,' wrote E.M. Wrong in 1929, of his study of Charles Buller.³ Such humility would be suicidal in a modern academic, and I do not propose to emulate it. Yet I should offer one disclaimer. I began doctoral research in 1967, the year that most Canadians celebrated the Centennial of Confederation and some, in Quebec, began to work to break Canada asunder. This book appears in the mid-1990s, as the issue of Quebec separation — now called sovereignty — is once

again to the fore. It would be utterly fallacious to read into the arguments advanced here some message for modern time. Perhaps the challenges which Canada has faced in the second century of Confederation have been a reminder that the country is the product not of destiny but of constant re-invention and human ingenuity. All I can say is that much of my work has been conducted at a distance, in parts of the world whose news media are famous for ignoring Canadian events. My affection for Canada is great; my appreciation of Canadian achievement enormous. Yet I am not a Canadian. I cannot expect to feel for Canada the emotions which it inspires in my friends who are its citizens. Most emphatically, it is not for me to pontificate about any possible relationship between Canada's past and its future. To argue that Confederation was not the obvious way forward for British North America in the 1860s is not to assert that it was the wrong course. Historians are by nature arrogantly judgmental, but nobody could get around the awkward truth that Confederation was sufficiently attractive to secure the support of enough British North Americans to bring about the adoption of a structure which has mutated and flourished for a century and a quarter. I hope that this re-examination of the origins of Confederation will be of interest and even of value to everyone who shares my enthusiasm for Canada, but there can be no profit in making the events of the 1860s a surrogate battleground for the challenges of the 1990s.

Ged Martin
Centre of Canadian Studies
University of Edinburgh
July 1994

Eastern British North America 1860

- Main Railways
- - - - - Colonial Boundary
- United States Border

← G

F →

- A Upper Canada (Canada West)
- B Lower Canada (Canada East)
- C New Brunswick
- D Nova Scotia
- E Prince Edward Island

Not included

- F Newfoundland
- G Red River, British Columbia

- 1 Lake Erie
- 2 Lake Ontario
- 3 Georgian Bay
- 4 Eastern Townships
- 5 Gaspé
- 6 Cape Breton
- 7 Magdalen Islands

- I Shediac
- m St Stephen
- n Charlottetown
- p Halifax
- q Truro
- r Yarmouth
- s Portland

- a Toronto
- b Hamilton
- c Sarnia
- d Kingston
- e Ottawa
- f Montreal
- g Quebec
- h Riviere-du-Loup
- i Saint John
- j Fredericton
- k The Bend (Moncton)