

Communications and Canadian-American Relations

(The last of four articles)

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During the period 1846-1914 Canadians continually argued among themselves as to what the proper posture vis-a-vis the Americans to their south ought to be. S. D. Clark has observed that historically, "We Canadians have had to keep comparing ourselves to you because we have had to show that somehow we are different from you. Canadian national identity has depended heavily upon the fostering of a feeling of anti-Americanism."¹

The politico-economic relations between the two nations were also of concern both to Canadians and Britishers during the period. In 1913 James Davenport Welpley contended that,

The ties between Canada and the United States are those compelling bonds of geographical and economic likeness, reciprocity of needs and markets, natural routes for trade and transportation, sympathetic financial exchanges, individual investments one within the confines of the other, to say nothing of the fact that more than a million Canadian-born . . . have found homes and profitable occupation in the United States, within easy hailing distance of their native land. . . .²

One principal concern of the two British peoples was over the ability of Great Britain to offset the American presence in North America. Joseph Howe in 1838 had warned Lord Glenelg of the British Colonial Office that, "If Great Britain is to maintain her footing upon the North American Continent . . . she must, at any hazard of even increased expenditure for a time, establish such a line of rapid communication by sea, as will ensure the speedy transmission of public despatches, commercial correspondence and general

*Speedy
Transmission*

information through channels exclusively British, and inferior to none in security and expedition."³

The problem of improving communication between Britain and Canada was one which occupied much thought in the years that followed Howe's warning. John George Lambton, Earl of Durham, in his "Report on the Affairs of British North America" in 1839 observed that Canadians were only reminded of the empire when the "uncertain and tardy communication bring intelligence of what has passed a month before on the other side of the Atlantic."⁴ John A. Macdonald complained to Henry Labouchere in 1857 that Britain was powerless to protect Canada from aggression without the means of communication and stated that, "the very first step towards the fulfillment of the promise is to provide proper access to the country."⁵ But the improvements in communications gained throughout the period apparently did not seem to Canadians to be completely sufficient, as 1911 found Charles Bright commenting that,

It is not unlikely that our present comparative lack of direct, speedy and cheap steamship and telegraphic communication with Canada has much to do with the gradual growth of trade relations between Canada and her neighbour the United States; and if these communicating links had been more nearly and satisfactorily achieved we should never have heard of a reciprocity agreement between these countries.⁶

On a more purely political level, Canadians apparently had no desire to emulate American political institutions, institutions which were obviously held up for their edification by the United States, in spite of the problems with the British Constitution which they did choose to model.⁷ Although Clark has noted that many Canadians had no "real desire to remain politically separate from their American neighbors," Berger has contended that Canadian imperialists "were all convinced that the republic represented an undesirable social order," and Hyam has written that, "the turbulent and unchecked democracy of the United States was regarded as a threat not only to peace but to the values of civilization."⁸ The notion was strong that the British Constitution was superior to the republican one, a notion which was commented upon increasingly by contemporary writers who concerned themselves with the "instability of American political institutions."⁹

*Democracy
As A Threat*

This idea may have been a logical one to draw from the experience of the American Civil War, which the Canadians watched from the front row. William Canniff, for instance, concluded during the conflict that, "although Canadians 'have not made a great mark in history,' we have reason to be glad we have not such marks of sin as those which rest upon a slaveholding nation, which all the blood now being spilt cannot wash out."¹⁰ Since Canada had developed the view over time that the American Constitution attached too great an importance on states' rights, the Civil War may have served to vindicate that view and criticism of republicanism.¹¹ The Civil War assuredly could have been correctly seen as a real threat to civilization, at least American civilization.

There were other opinions, too, which decried the direction of the republic. George M. Grant emphatically denied that the republican form of government was the same as the Canadian.¹² He articulated a common theme in Canadian criticism of America, that the United States had left behind its religious and moral principles in favor of unrestrained democracy.

Nicholas Flood Davin claimed that every democratic community failed in making allowance for differentiating one man from another, except on the scale of wealth, which by its nature, "usurps a disproportionate and unhealthy place of the mind."¹³ Morgan and Burpee claimed that one noticeable feature of the American character was the "intense, all-absorbing quest of the 'almighty dollar.'"¹⁴ Nevertheless, the comparisons were not always so anti-American. Even Charles Wentworth Dilke, commenting on his trip to North America, remarked,

In all history there is nothing stranger than the narrowness of mind that has led us to see in Canada a piece of England, and in America a hostile country. There are more sons of British subjects in America than in Canada, by far; and the American looks upon the old country with a pride that cannot be shared by a man who looks to her to pay his soldiers.¹⁵

In spite of the Canadian abhorrence of American republicanism, though, the United States was still an object of admiration for many. This admiration existed, too, in spite of the facts that Canadians consciously differentiated themselves from Americans, viewed the United States' climate as being conducive to decay and effeminacy, and saw her people

"Almighty
Dollar"

as an unstable and violent race which had lost its Anglo-Saxon identity due to the influx of foreign races.¹⁶

The Canadians were constantly looking south, measuring what they were doing by what the Americans were doing, or already had done.¹⁷ This was true of the vision they developed as to what life in the western hemisphere involved, and what role Canadians as Canadians should be occupying in the world.¹⁸ Even the French Canadians, who "feared the omnivorous, all-embracing culture of the United States," viewed the American progress and prosperity with fascinated admiration.¹⁹

There were several writers of the period who drew comparisons between the United States and Canada; they were particularly keen to compare the state of communications which existed within each nation. J. Despard Pemberton, for instance, contrasted the philosophies of the United States and Canada in regard to the accomplishment of public works in areas of new emigration--extolling the American method and suggesting that the development of British Columbia, Saskatchewan and the Red River settlement was retarded by their lack of connection.²⁰ He contrasted their condition with the "vitality" of Washington, Oregon and California derived "from the chain of excellent communications by land that bind them to one another, and to the Eastern American States. . . ."²¹ Edward Watkin, too, was impressed by the extent of internal American communications systems, as was William Robinson.²² In the Select Committee hearings on telephone systems in Canada in 1905 A. Zimmerman commented that people in the United States seemed to find so much more use for the telephone than did Canadians.²³

Americans
Phoned More

Another source of envy for Canadians was the extent of American business enterprise. Gibbon has commented on the enterprising ideal of Americans, noting the American idea of hustle, eager for any device that may mean the saving of a day, an hour, a minute, organizing for speed . . ." while during the period White concluded that many Canadians in 1870 were convinced that, if Canada were annexed, American capital would become available, **making possible the material advantages possessed by Americans.**²⁴ Hardy commented, too, that many of the same attitudes which White identified in 1870 also existed in Canada in 1887, while Dilke, in his widely-read Greater Britain, noted that,

. . . in journeying from Portland to Quebec, the moment the frontier was passed, we seemed to have come from a land of life to one of death. No more bustling villages,

no more keen-eyed farmers: a fog of unenterprise hung over the land; the roads were wanting, houses were rude, swamps undrained, fields unweeded, plains un-tilled.²⁵

The Canadian journalist, Agnes Laut, in 1909 seemed to envy the American pioneer enterprise which dictated that settlement proceed to the best lands ahead of the railway, while "the Canadian settler has always stuck to the line of the railroad like a burr."²⁶ Thomas Rawlings, in 1865, noted that as a result of Red River's increasing intercourse with the American Minnesota settlements, a "spirit of enterprise" had developed, a fact also hinted at by a later observer, S. D. Clark.²⁷ To the Canadian viewing the activities of the large, boisterous sister to his south, there was apparently much that he alternately abhorred and admired. It was no wonder that his feelings about such questions as reciprocity and annexation sometimes seemed befuddled. America was a befuddling sort of nation.

*Erie Forced
Welland Canal*

There were times, also, regardless of Canadian feelings about the practical consequences of a particular action, when certain initiatives had to be taken in order to compensate for actions taken by the Americans. Canadians, for instance, were compelled to build the Welland Canal as a result of the American construction of the Erie Canal, which itself had been built to Lake Erie rather than to the more accessible and closer Lake Ontario in order to avoid assisting the City of Montreal which New York entrepreneurs saw as dominating the lower lake.²⁸ In 1868 William Robinson, proposing the construction of the Quebec and Halifax Railroad, contended that, "It is the one great means by which alone the power of the Mother Country can be brought to bear on this side of the Atlantic, and restore the balance of power now fast turning to the side of the United States."²⁹

The efforts made by the Canadians and other British colonials to attract British emigrants at the expense of the United States has been noted by Plummer Jones, an effort which was advocated by John Young and Hamilton Killaly in 1851 when they championed the establishment of a line of steamers between Liverpool and Quebec in order to divert part of the emigration stream and to call public attention to the superior facilities of the St. Lawrence for transporting freight and passengers.³⁰ Given the lure of America as it appeared in the accessible print media of Ireland during the nineteenth century, however, these efforts may have been

fore-doomed to futility.³¹ Glazebrook has written that the desire to offset American activities also prompted the building of Canadian railways, a notion confirmed by reading Foster's letter to McDougall in 1869 and the Nelson Valley Railway proposal of 1881, as well as the attempted establishment of postal communication between Toronto and Fort Garry in 1858.³² Hyam blamed the same impulses for Canada's desire to become a "continental dominion," while Penlington has remarked that the Canadians entered the South African War in order to re-establish the imperial unity necessary to balance United States power which had surfaced during the Alaska boundary dispute.³³ And finally, J. P. B. Casgrain wrote in 1909 that, "Our neighbors are a very wide awake people and are seriously contemplating the construction of a canal from Lake Michigan by way of the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico, a fact which should spur us on to immediate action."³⁴ But what the Canadians were to do to offset such a scheme was left unsaid.

*Make Canada
Competitive*

Canadian communications system construction was also seen as accomplishing two goals. The construction was to make Canada competitive and to establish Canada's independence from the United States and its communications systems. John George Lambton suggested that in order to offset United States influence in Canada, a society would have to be created "having some objects of a national importance . . ." to claim as its reason for existence.³⁵ This was exactly part of the reasoning which entered into discussions for establishing Canadian communications systems, particularly true in the case of railroads.³⁶ One example of this reasoning was provided by W. S. Fielding, Minister of Finance of Canada, who said about the Canadian commitment to the Grand Trunk at the turn of the century,

It is well that we should let our friends across the border understand that whatever measure of independence we now have we shall maintain, and that we shall increase that measure of independence by the line we are now proposing, and that, should the necessity arise, we shall not shrink from providing another.³⁷

Other aspects of Canadian-American relations which entered into discussions of Canadian communications systems development was Canadian suspicion of United States motives in her dealings with Canada and fear of American encroachments. Several scholars have concluded, for instance, that fear of the United States was the primary motivation behind

the 1867 Canadian Confederation.³⁸ And although there were some in Canada who shared Goldwin Smith's view that American annexation of Canada was an eventual certainty, more typical of Canadian attitudes during the period was extravagant loyalty to Britain or advocacy of an equally bold and free spirit within Canadians to offset the American spirit.³⁹ There were also a plethora of events during the period which reinforced the Canadian fear of American intentions towards her.⁴⁰

Although T. F. Bayard, United States Secretary of State, told Charles Tupper in 1887 that he recognized that the United States was then facing a nation as a result of the completion of the Canadian Pacific, Americans as a whole did not fully recognize the permanency of Canada until the conclusion of World War I.⁴¹ Even the long land frontier between the two nations was not truly "undefended" until the signing of the Treaty of Washington in 1871.⁴²

The fear of Americans generated by these and other activities also had implications for Canadian communications development. John A. Macdonald wrote to Henry Labouchere on August 14, 1857, that it was apparent that either a large military force must be retained in the interior of Canada to repel any American invasion, or a means of communication from the sea to the interior, which would be unencumbered by ice, must be developed.⁴³ Edward Watkin claimed to have seen in 1863 that the only way to secure control over the fertile prairie belt and the territory which surrounded it was to construct a main line of telegraph from St. Paul to the Hudson's Bay territory around Fort Garry and on west as far as the Rockies.⁴⁴ His observation was later echoed by others.⁴⁵

*Prairie
Telegraph*

The Canadians were frustrated by their inability to offset all the moves made by the United States. This frustration was summed up by Nicholas Flood Davin's exasperated 1873 remark that, "there is no necessity that in order to preserve its existence, the Republic should become a prey to the dangerous and degrading lust of territory, hanker after annexation, and dream delusively of a time when the new civilization will extend over the entire of North America."⁴⁶ The Canadians wanted to be left alone, or at least be left out of the American union.

But in some ways the Canadians were dependent on the Americans, for instance in the importation of technology,

knowhow, and expert management.⁴⁷ In many cases, when these necessary elements to communications systems development were not imported, Canadians found themselves dependent on American systems in order to accomplish communication across her own vast expanse of territory. Eden Colville of the Hudson's Bay Company regularly used the postal communication route which had been established between Pembina on the Canadian frontier and St. Peter's, a route which connected with St. Paul, Minnesota, to communicate with his superiors in London.⁴⁸ This practice became so widespread that by the mid 1850's the Company was allowing traders to deal with American commercial houses, effectively breaking its own commercial monopoly in the West, by using overland trails to the south and steamboats beginning in 1859.⁴⁹

Every section of Canada seemed to have its own peculiar complaint about the necessity of depending on the United States for communication. The people of the Maritime Provinces complained that their mail service to Europe was subject to material delay due to the necessity of routing it through either Montreal or New York;⁵⁰ Montreal found that its overland traffic from the Atlantic coast in the winter had to travel through the United States;⁵¹ Ontario and Quebec discovered that eighty per cent of their mail and passenger traffic were routed through the States (also true to the remainder of Canada).⁵² Canada's first use of the electric telegraph was to accept European news carried from Buffalo, which was connected by telegraph with New York, via steamer across Lake Ontario in 1846.⁵³

*Dependent
On the U.S.A.*

The two areas which were most dependent upon the United States for their communication with the outside world, until the opening of the CPR, were the Red River settlement and British Columbia. The Select Committee on the Hudson's Bay Company, Great Britain, 1857, reported that regardless of whether Canada wanted to govern the Red River settlement as a dependency or incorporate it into her legislature, there was one "insuperable objection"--the settlement could only be reached by passing through the United States.⁵⁴ By 1876 Carpenter and Blakely's St. Paul Stage Company was receiving more than \$25,000 per year to carry Canadian and American mail to Red River.⁵⁵

Even more dependent, however, than any of the more eastern provinces was British Columbia. Pemberton wrote in 1860, for instance, "America feeds us; America carries our

letters for us; we reach them by American steamers, or we travel by American routes; the bulk of the merchandise we consume comes from American ports."⁵⁶ In 1864 Dr. J. S. Helmecken remarked in the House of Assembly of Vancouver Island that, "So far as direct steam communication is concerned . . . we have been more liberally treated by our American neighbours . . . far more so than by Her Majesty's Government."⁵⁷

There were, in addition to these complaints, other indications of Canada's dependence on the United States. Between 1901 and 1914, the United States was the recipient of between 69% and 74% of all Canadian patents, in spite of the fact that Canada by that time had entered well into her own industrial revolution. During the period, Canadian patentees received only between 12% and 17.5% of the patents granted in their own country.⁵⁸ In 1876 imports by Canada of American goods by value exceeded those of Britain for the first time. The gap between American and British imports grew increasingly wide from that time forward, in favor of America.⁵⁹ Also, the amount of American investment in Canada increased throughout the period.⁶⁰ By 1906 Victor Berard had concluded,

Physically and commercially Canada is already an appendage of the United States, and will become more and more so. The policy of the day, on both sides of the frontier, tends to separate one from the other. But for what length of time can any policy stand in the way of obvious and superior interests? When the completion of the new and up-to-date canal system shall have constituted New York the only natural port of the entire region of the Great Lakes, the geographical dependence of Canada will be still more marked.⁶¹

"Roll Over",
"Play Dead"?

Many Canadians, however, were not willing to "roll over and play dead" in the face of what seemed to be to many others an irreversible tide of increasing dependence on the United States.⁶² William Hamilton Merritt wrote to Sir George Arthur on February 16, 1839, that the defective system of communication-transportation through Canada had caused the loss of the trade of the area from Lake Champlain to Lake Superior within the United States and he advocated that steps be taken to regain that trade.⁶³ Young and Killaly reported in 1851 that the difference in freight rates between New York and Quebec, which amounted to 100% in favor of the American port, could be accounted for by the emigrant traffic to New

York which Quebec lacked and which caused ships travelling to Canadian ports to arrive in ballast. They suggested a line of steamers to carry emigrants to Canada in order to offset the differential.⁶⁴ when the Erie Canal had destroyed "Montreal's commercial empire around the lower lakes," the Canadians built the Welland with the objective of capturing the trade of the American Midwest and western Upper Canada.⁶⁵

Attempts were also made by Canadians to secure the western trade of the United States by constructing railroads.⁶⁶ Although a United States Senate committee was certain that the construction of the Northern Pacific had sealed the fate of western Canada, which would "become so Americanized in interests and feelings that they will be in effect severed from the new Dominion, and the question of their annexation will be but a question of time," the Canadians were not willing to quietly acquiesce to such a fate.⁶⁷ They took the threat seriously, for the proposed railways to British Columbia in the early 1870's included provisions for links with American lines to secure the western states' trade, perhaps as a kind of offsetting influence to the American presence in Canada's western trade.⁶⁸ The dominating motive of the rail construction was, then, "the control of the communications of the United States," a strategy which, however bold, failed.⁶⁹ The lines were at least successful, though, in forcing the American lines to withdraw their Canadian emigration agents which had solicited business from those moving west and in capturing part of the Dakota business.⁷⁰ In spite of the mixed success of the schemes, the idea of capturing the rich American trade retained its hold on the Canadian imagination.⁷¹

*Business
Intertwined*

Almost in defiance of the desires of many Canadians, the fortunes of business in the two nations became increasingly intertwined, a result of many of the actions taken by both Canadian and American entrepreneurs, financiers, merchants, farmers and fishermen, and national governments. Brebner called the two nations economic "Siamese twins," and Rawlings contended that, "in a mercantile aspect the Canadas and the United States are married to one another."⁷²

That the frontier was being crossed by settlers, by capital, and by working arrangements was undeniable. "In 1851 the first international through [rail] service connected Boston and Montreal," for instance.⁷³ On December 23, 1848, the first telegraphic line between St. John and the United

States was completed.⁷⁴ In 1865 the Western Union Telegraph Company placed the first telegraph line in British Columbia, and by 1903 "Between Lake Winnipeg and the Pacific Ocean eleven railways connect[ed] Canada with the United States, and others [were] being built."⁷⁵ And there were other examples of these connections as well.⁷⁶

But Canadians also periodically fought against any infringements on their independence. During the first discussions of a Pacific railway in 1873, "Thirty million dollars and 50,000,000 acres of land were offered in aid . . . on condition that no American interests should be admitted."⁷⁷ The scheme failed in the Pacific Scandal which turned John A. Macdonald out of office, but in the second round of discussions the Canadian Pacific "was . . . proclaimed as a purely national and imperial enterprise which was to assure the perpetual separation of Canada from the United States . . . in which no Yankee was in any way whatever to take part."⁷⁸ But, as Goldwin Smith somewhat sarcastically observed,

An American firm was in the syndicate; an American, now Vice-President of the United States, was the first Vice-President of the Company; a genuine American was the first manager and is now the President. The line runs through the State of Maine; it connects the Canadian with the American railway system not there only but at the Sault Ste. Marie and at its Pacific terminus. It is an applicant for bonding privileges at Washington, and in danger of being brought under the Inter-State Commerce Act. It is in fact, or soon will be, as much an American as a Canadian line.⁷⁹

*Intimate
Embrace*

The results which occurred, and which wed the Canadians and the Americans in an increasingly intimate embrace during the period, took place almost unhindered. There were feeble attempts to stem the tide, such as the refusal of the Canadian government in the 1890's to support a Canadian-owned railway in American territory, and the continual tariff wars waged by the two nations from 1865 onward, but neither of these decisions, nor the protests like those of John A. Macdonald to Henry Labouchere or of the Toronto World in 1885 seemed to slow the momentum significantly.⁸⁰

The protests and adverse decisions were offset, too, by other opinions which entered into the public dialogue. Goldwin Smith remained convinced throughout the period that Canada's destiny was closely bound to that of the United

States;⁸¹ George E. Foster hoped in 1909 that the "imaginary line" between the two nations would remain just that, imaginary, through substantial;⁸² and the Bystander in 1880 and The Week of 1886 and 1887 carried stories and opinions on commercial union, and predicting its eventual occurrence.⁸³

The final element in the equation of Canadian-American relations was the perceived position of Great Britain. On this front Canadians saw themselves suffering in their relationship with Britain as a result of the British courtship of America.⁸⁴ Statements such as that of Joseph Chamberlain in 1887 in Toronto, in which he refused "to think or to speak of the U.S.A. as a foreign nation," worried Canadians.⁸⁵ As Hyam has concluded, "Britain determined to solve her problems by admitting the Americans as equal partners in the Pax Britannica, and the function of the special relationship myth [fed to the Canadians] was to sooth the doubts and to make the pill more palatable to swallow."⁸⁶ One particularly sore spot was the position of Great Britain in a succession of boundary disputes between Canada and the United States in this period.⁸⁷

*wooing
 America*

There were some mitigating circumstances to explain Britain's attitude in the various Canadian-American boundary disputes. One notable circumstance was that Britain was philosophically resigned to the fact that the North American colonies would probably eventually be a part of the American Union anyway. Another was that the United States negotiated from a superior position based on detailed observation and exploration which both the Canadian and British negotiators lacked.⁸⁸ But the Canadians were not appeased by such arguments and blamed Great Britain and the United States, and their cultivated relations, for their own "forced" territorial concessions, as well as for other difficulties.⁸⁹

The relations, then, between the United States and Canada during this period were exceedingly complex ones. Canada seemed torn, on the one hand, between her admiration of much which was perceived as being good in America, her dependence on the United States in areas of expertise, technology and capital acquisition, and her desire to participate in the rich American market, and, on the other, by her abhorrence of American institutions and ideals, her fear of American motives and desires, and her jealousy and anger at being "sold out" by the British, who seemed to be attempting to buy American friendship at Canada's expense. The Canadians clearly saw themselves as being on the defensive during

this period, at least in the area of their relations with the rich and boisterous nation to their south. This defensiveness was exacerbated by what was perceived to be the indifferent British attitude toward Canada, and by the hesitation which Canadians seemed to have about mapping out their own destiny. Due to the complexity of the Canadian cultural and ethnic milieu, the apparent helplessness of Canada in the face of immense economic and military vitality to her south, and the differing regional imperatives of her diverse economic and geographic sections, many Canadians found it difficult to establish and secure reasonable goals in the various recurring conflicts with the United States. All this was part of the political matrix which influenced much of the Canadian perception of their communications environment and necessities.

Footnotes

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20. See J. Despart Pemberton, Facts and Figures Relating to Vancouver Island and British Columbia, London: Longman, Green, Longman, & Roberts, 1860, 78.
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