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Canadian Opinion of Southern Secession, 1860-61

By Fred Landon

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Sir Wilfrid Laurier, a few years before his death, recalled that as a youth in a Montreal law office he was made an out-and-out anti-slavery man by the reading of Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Doubtless that was the experience of many another young Canadian of the time; for in Canada, as in the United States itself, Mrs. Stowe's book converted, by its emotional appeal, many who had been unmoved by the long debate over the slavery question. Historians to-day give due credit to the influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in shaping Northern opinion. James Ford Rhodes says that its publication was one of the chief influences in bringing about the revolution in American public sentiment between 1850 and 1860 and leading to the success of the Republican party at the end of that decade. The book appeared in Canada soon after publication in the United States, went into several editions, and was translated into French for an edition sold in the province of Quebec where, according to Mr. Benjamin Sulte, it was widely read.

There were other influences, however, at work in Canada before 1860 tending to create sympathy with the free states of the north in the approaching struggle over slavery. Such direct influences as trade and family connections were supplemented by the effective propaganda of the Canadian Anti-Slavery Society and by the attitude of such public men as George Brown and Thomas D'Arcy McGee. [2] In Upper Canada the refugees from slavery must also be counted in as an influence in the formation of public opinion. Contact with the victims of the slavery system, as they arrived in Canada homeless and destitute, was likely to create sympathy with the principles of the Republican party when it came into being across the line. Here were the characters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the actual flesh, and their stories supplemented the narrative of Mrs. Stowe. On the eve of the Civil War there were also two events which contributed to the fixing of Canadian public opinion in opposition to slavery. The first of these was the John Brown raid on Harper's Ferry in October, 1859, an event which had a distinctly Canadian connection, since the plans were laid at the convention

held by Brown in Chatham, C.W., in May, 1858. This was followed later by the famous Anderson case in Toronto in 1860 where a negro fugitive, John Anderson, was brought into the courts in extradition proceedings, the charge being that while escaping from slavery some years before he had killed a Missouri planter. Canadian feeling was aroused in a considerable degree by this case, as the leading newspaper files of the day well indicate, and though the negro was really freed on a technicality there was popular exultation that slavery had no power in Canadian courts of law.^[3]

The combined effect of these various influences was that on the eve of the Civil War Canadians were decidedly anti-slavery in their opinions. Indeed, despite the influence of a small group who sympathized with the south, and were not always discreet in their expression of sympathy, the real heart of Canada was with Lincoln and the North throughout most of the war; and the tributes that came from the British provinces when the President was shot in April, 1865, did more than diplomacy to wipe out the bitterness felt by the North over the *Trent* incident and the operations of Confederates and their sympathizers in Canada. The pro-Southern group in Canada attracted attention chiefly by their violations of the country's neutrality, and their attitude towards the struggle going on across the border was in no sense representative of Canadian opinion generally. If anything they were more Southern than the South, for when in 1865 a resolution of sympathy over the death of Lincoln came before the Toronto City Council one of the members voted against it. Southern leaders were more magnanimous than that.

The Canadian government showed a generally friendly feeling towards the North during the whole war, the Trent affair being the only event that seemed likely to break friendly relations. British statesmen thought there was a very real danger in the defenceless character of the provinces, and exerted themselves to remedy that situation; but the Canadian parliament manifested few signs of alarm and only towards the end of the Civil War did it show a disposition to fall in with the British plans. Even then it was the concern voiced in Britain, and the influence of Col. Jervais, representing the British government, rather than apprehension of impending danger that resulted in the decision, early in 1865, to appropriate a million dollars at once for defence. It was generally agreed that Britain's interest in Canadian defence ought not to be ignored, even though the fears might be exaggerated, and it was also recognized as essential that Canadian credit be maintained in London. W. H. Russell, the Canadian correspondent of The Times, who travelled through Canada shortly after the war opened, says: "The Canadians with whom I conversed . . . declared that they were quite ready to defend their country in case of invasion, but did not understand

being taken away to distant parts to fight for the homes of others. It seemed quite clear to them that the United States would only invade Canada to humiliate and weaken the mother country, and that the general defence of the province ought to devolve on the power whose policy had led to the war; whilst the inhabitants should be ready to give the Imperial troops every assistance in the localities where they are actually resident."^[4]

It should not be inferred from this that Canadians were too prone to trust their neighbours and to admire all that was done by the North. As a matter of fact, Canadian opinion of the American national character was far from flattering. Charles Dickens was not alone in picturing the rowdyism and rough bluster of certain sections of the republic; only a few years before there had been a vast amount of spread-eagle oratory over the Oregon boundary question. Canadians were likely to contrast the best points of their laws and system of government, patterned after those of a great monarchy, with the more objectionable features of the advanced democracy of their neighbours. There was a widespread opinion in Canada that politics in the United States was synonymous with corruption, and that public affairs were in the hands of a baser element. It was easy to recall instances where Americans had indulged in the pastime of twisting the lion's tail, and these were often felt more keenly in Canada than they were in Great Britain. Despite all this, the Canadian people felt that in the slavery struggle the North was in the right. During the fifties they were being strengthened in this view by a variety of influences at work, but particularly by the powerful agency of the Toronto Globe, George Brown's newspaper, and by the activities of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, operating through its branches.^[5] The amount of attention which Brown gave to American affairs through the columns of his paper served to educate its readers on the slavery issue, and through them whole communities were influenced. Through the Globe files after 1850 runs the whole story of the Fugitive Slave Act, the Kansas troubles, the birth of the Republican party, the John Brown raid, and the gradual break-up of the Democratic party leading to the election of Lincoln as president in 1860. As early as 1858, Brown, in the Globe, was confidently predicting the election of a Republican president, but had picked on Seward as the fittest candidate for the new party to support. [6] Douglas he regarded as straddling the fence at a time when the issue was clear.[7] The Globe gave much attention to the Harper's Ferry raid, with the earlier stages of which its editor may have been acquainted; and when John Brown was executed at Charleston in December, 1859, the comment was made that "his death will aid in awakening the North to that earnest spirit which can alone

bring the South to understand its true position."[8] It was further predicted that if a Republican president were elected the next year nothing short of a dissolution of the union would satisfy the South. In the slave states there was a tone of bitterness towards Canada over the Harper's Ferry incident. In the course of Brown's trial, the details of the Chatham meeting of May, 1858, were brought forward. It was shown that plans for an attack on the slavery system had been prepared at this meeting in Canada, and that only the treachery of an associate had prevented a tragedy in the early summer of 1858 similar to that which took place in October of 1859. Governor Wise, of Virginia, was particularly outspoken in denunciation of plottings in Canada, and was quoted by the New York Herald as calling upon President Buchanan to demand from England that plottings cease and that negro refugees be henceforth denied the right to remain in Canada. In this he was backed up by some southern newspapers, and De Bow's Southern Review, in an ugly mood, referred to "the vile, sensuous, animal, brutal, infidel, superstitious Democracy of Canada and the Yankees."[9]

Early in 1860 interest began to centre on the presidential election. Reference to Lincoln appeared in the *Globe* of February 24, and in subsequent issues the opinion was expressed that the Republican candidate would have a good chance of being elected. The break-up of the Democrats at the Charleston convention furnished Brown with a text for reading a homily to John A. Macdonald, his political opponent, on the difficulty of "trying to serve both God and Mammon". On May 18, the *Globe* had a strongly worded editorial on the American situation, declaring that Canada could not but view the approaching election with deepest interest. It was not a mere struggle for office, but a struggle of principles, and while the immediate issue might be doubtful the ultimate result was certain. In a later issue it was pointed out that the question was really whether or not the huge sore of slavery should cover the body politic or be confined to its own place. The triumph of the Republican party in the election would be "a triumph of righteousness". [11]

The election of Lincoln in November, 1860, was received with much satisfaction in Canada, although Canadians, like their neighbours, were at first puzzled by the choice of Lincoln rather than Seward. Through the winter of 1860-61, when the Southern states were breaking away from the union, and Southern senators and representatives were delivering their parting speeches in the Congressional halls at Washington, Brown in the *Globe* continued to sound a note of confidence in Lincoln and the North. "Since Abraham Lincoln became President," said the issue of January 7,

1861, "we have waded through many speeches delivered by men in and out of Congress but we have totally failed to find any one good and sufficient reason for destroying the union." A little later the comment was made: "We in Canada naturally take a deep interest in the progress of the events that are threatening the stability and even the national existence of the great republic . . . knowing that this issue will have a most important influence on the future of this continent with which our destinies are linked." [12]

The progress of the secession movement suggested to Canadians the possibility in the near future of two confederacies, one looking southward for more territory in which to employ slaves, the other looking to the north to recoup itself in the British provinces for a lost south. The New York *Herald* constantly discussed this possibility during the earlier months of 1861, predicting revolution in Canada at no distant date and subsequent annexation to the United States. "It is obvious," said the *Herald*, "that Canada comes first within the scope of Northern acquisition and must soon be numbered as a bright, particular star on the azure shield. The Canadians have long been panting for more freedom than they can enjoy under British rule." To which the *Globe* replied: "New and entangling alliances are not the fashion in Canada just now." [14]

The attitude taken by the Toronto Leader, representing to some extent the Tory element in Canada, affords some interesting contrasts to George Brown and the Globe. The Leader was not as hostile to the North at the opening of the Civil War as it came to be at a later date, but its comment in 1861 was on rather a low plane, the crisis in the United States being regarded chiefly from the standpoint of how much Canada would gain from her neighbour's domestic trouble. The Leader was unable "to anticipate any disastrous commercial result to Canada from the revolutionary movement now going on in the Southern states", and could even see some distinct gains that Canada might make as a result of the impending civil war. It predicted that a large amount of immigration would be diverted from American to Canadian ports, but feared that Canadian trade might suffer by the reduction of the number of states actually in the union.^[15] Occasionally the Leader viewed the crisis from a higher level, as, for instance, in the issue of January 17, 1861, when it said: "We regret that a great nation, which is making a great experiment in self-government, should even seem to fail." Canada, it was pointed out in a later issue, could not be a mere onlooker in the coming struggle, since already both North and South were claiming that they would get recruits in Canada. It would be the duty of the provinces, said the

Leader, to maintain an armed neutrality with "a respectable show of regular soldiery, sufficient at least to produce an impression of preparedness".^[16]

A rather subtle literary influence was at work in Canada during 1861 in the letters of W. H. Russell to The Times, which were reprinted by the Leader and other Canadian papers. The Leader appears to have had some doubts regarding Russell's fairness to the North, [17] though in justice to The Times' correspondent it must be said that he was not at any time a defender of either slavery or the secession movement. Indeed, in words that could not be mistaken, he told the English people that the cause of the South was the cause of slavery; and both the Richmond Examiner and the Memphis Appeal declared that his letters were hostile to the South. [18] Nevertheless, in all that Russell wrote on the American crisis there was a smug complacency that must have been galling to the North and that tended to create a wrong impression in other countries and among readers unacquainted with American conditions. As far as the North was concerned, Russell was too impartial for a people on the verge of war. If he had been out and out for the South, they would have understood him. If he had been out and out for the North, they would have lionized him. The American people, in the early months of 1861, were not in the mood to go behind words and find motives. In England and in Canada the result of Russell's writings was to create doubts regarding the honesty of purpose of the North, and this indirectly tended to create some feeling of sympathy for the South.[19]

Once the Southern states had begun to break away a new influence began to make itself felt in Canada in the influx of both Northern and Southern elements. Canada had for some years been a popular summer home for wealthy Southerners, and early in 1861 many families began to arrive, the heads of the households being already in the Confederate forces. There were also some Southern families who had sold out everything and came to Canada to make it their permanent home, at least until conditions had become straightened out in the South. These Southern refugees were naturally bitter towards the North, and during the whole of the war they tended to alienate Canadian sentiment from the cause for which Lincoln was holding fast. On the other hand, the element that came in from the North was not of the type that would counteract Southern propaganda. "Skedaddlers", leaving their homes in the North to evade military service, depressed the labour market in Canada and lowered wages in some trades. [20] There were pacifists as well who had left the country or been driven out.[21] The Leader of May 1, 1861, reported that "already a large number of persons have come

from the United States to Canada."[22] It was also stated that the Southerners had made vain endeavours to secure privateers in Canada and that the North had tried to buy arms and ammunition in Canada, though successful in obtaining only a small supply from some private dealers in Montreal. The Montreal *Pilot* stated that American recruiting officers (presumably Northern) had already been in Montreal and had secured a few volunteers. [23] The Montreal Commercial Advertiser of April 24, 1861, said that telegrams had been received from the Governor of Massachusetts and others, asking for the loan of rifles and other war material. The Advertiser commenting on this took the ground that Canada should remain strictly neutral, and even that the government should see to it that there was no exportation of contraband, no enlisting for either army, or any other participation in the conflict on the part of Canadians. The question of selling arms to the belligerents was brought up in the Canadian parliament on April 26, 1861, but the government at that time made no statement of its attitude. The legislature of Nova Scotia made no secret of its sympathy with the North, and on April 13, 1861, the day that Fort Sumter fell, Joseph Howe moved a resolution expressing regret that there should be civil war between the States and expressing the earnest hope that peace would soon be restored. [24]

Thomas D'Arcy McGee did much during 1861 to set very plainly before the Canadian people the real issues that were involved in the American crisis. He had lived in the United States for a number of years before coming to Canada, and as a journalist there had gained real insight into the problems facing the republic. During 1861 he delivered a number of addresses in which he pointed out that Canada was bound to be touched by the struggle, that the Canadian people must not expect to remain quite unmoved, and that there would be certain duties for them to perform. Possibly the best statement of his views is contained in the speech which he delivered at London, C.W., on September 26, 1861, just a few months after the war had begun. [25] In this speech he said:

The interests of Canada in the American civil war are, in general, the interest of all free governments, and in particular the interest of a next neighbour, having a thousand miles of frontier and many social enterprises in common with the Republic. We are ourselves an American people geographically and commercially, though we retain our British connection; our situation is continental, and our politics, in the largest and best sense, must needs be continental. . . . As a free people, with absolute, domestic self-government, with local liberties, bound up in an Imperial Union,

governed by our own majority constitutionally ascertained, we are as deeply interested in the issue of the present unhappy contest as any of the States of the United States; while as a North American people, Canadians are more immediately and intimately concerned in the issue than any other population.

Tracing the growth of the ultra-slavery doctrine, the speaker pointed out that of late years a new conception of slavery had overrun the South, that it was national not local, constitutional not temporary, and this fallacy had begotten a false philosophy to strengthen it and a false theology to sanctify it. The seceding states, if successful in the conflict, would set up a "pagan republic, an oligarchy founded upon caste, the caste upon colour". Slavery would soon occupy larger space on the continent than freedom, and the Gulf of Guinea would become familiar with the new flag flying from the masts of slave-ships. With two republics, where there had formerly been one, an era of military rivalry would inevitably follow.

Are we prepared to welcome a state of permanent and still-increasing armaments for North America; are we prepared by word, or deed, or sign, or secret sympathy, to hasten the advent of such times, for our posterity, if not ourselves? I sincerely trust that a wiser and a nobler sense of our position and duties will direct and instruct us to a wiser and nobler use of whatever influence we may possess with the mother country in this present exigency.

The specious influences that were being used to turn away Canadian sympathy from the North were dealt with at some length, and reference was also made to the commercial interests of Canada that were involved in the struggle. In his conclusion, McGee said:

As between continental peace and chronic civil war; as between natural right and oligarchical oppression; as between the constitutional majority and the lawless minority; as between free intercourse and armed frontiers; as between negro emancipation and a revival of the slave trade; as between the golden rule and the cotton crop of 1861; as between the revealed unity of the race and the heartless heresy of African bestiality; as between the North and the South in this deplorable contest, I rest firmly in the belief that all that is most liberal, most intelligent, and most magnanimous in Canada and the Empire, are for continental peace, for

constitutional arbitrament, for universal, if gradual emancipation, for free intercourse, for justice, mercy, civilization and the North.

In the course of the next four years, McGee had to revise some of his opinions of the American republic, as far as Canada was concerned, but at no time did his faith in the justice of the anti-slavery cause weaken. Recognizing, however, that a victorious North might become intoxicated with the lust of conquest, he warned Canadians to guard well their heritage.

I do not believe that it is our destiny to be engulfed into a Republican union, renovated and inflamed with the wine of victory, of which she now drinks so deeply—it seems to me we have theatre enough under our feet to act another and a worthier part; we can hardly join the Americans on our own terms, and we never ought to join them on theirs.^[26]

The crisis of 1860-61, with the four years of civil war that followed, were powerful influences leading to the confederation of the provinces in 1867. The spectacle of four years of desperate fighting not far from the Canadian border, the increase in the size of the Northern armies year by year, and the warlike spirit of most of the Northern States warned Canadians that their divided and unprotected country would be easy prey if an evil spirit prompted an attack on Canada after the South was subjugated. It is quite clear that such military preparations as were made between 1861 and 1865 would have offered small obstacle to Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan had they led their armies across the border line. After events, however, showed the victorious armies more anxious to return to their homes than to start out on further wars, and in the restoration of the South the federal government at Washington had a domestic problem that transcended in importance any foreign affair. But if the American situation hastened the Canadian confederation it also profoundly influenced the form that the confederation was to take. The weaknesses revealed in the American constitution were object lessons to the men who met at the Quebec conference. The new Canadian nation was to build on another foundation.

English opinion of the civil war is often referred to as having influenced Canada. There is evidence that it had much less effect than is generally supposed. As spectators two thousand miles nearer the contest, Canadians were little inclined to take their views of the war at second-hand. Clear evidence of the side that was favoured is seen in the fact that, while Canadian aid to the South was almost negligible, it was estimated that

40,000 Canadians were enlisted in the armies of the North during the four years of the war. [27]

- Rhodes, *History of the United States*, vol. I., p. 278. Longfellow spoke of the book as a literary triumph and greater as a moral triumph. Lowell wrote of the "whirl of excitement" that it caused; and Macaulay said that it was the most valuable addition that America had made to English literature.
- See Lewis, *George Brown* (Makers of Canada series), pp. 111-119; also McGee, *Speeches and addresses; chiefly on the subject of British-American union*, London, 1865. McGee's speeches during the early sixties contain frequent references to the situation in the United States.
- [3] For a popular account of the Anderson trial, see *Canadian Magazine*, September, 1915, pp. 397-401.
- [4] W. H. Russell, Canada, its defences, condition and resources, Boston, 1865, p. 61.
- A brief account of the organization and work of the Antislavery Society may be found in the *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 4, pp. 33-40.
- [6] The *Globe*, Nov. 19, 1858.
- [7] The *Globe*, July 8, 1859.
- [8] The *Globe*, Dec. 9, 1859.
- [9] Quoted in the *Globe*, March 21, 1861.
- [10] The *Globe*, May 4, 1860.
- [<u>11</u>] The *Globe*, June 1, 1860.
- [12] The *Globe*, Jan. 18, 1861.

- Thomas D'Arcy McGee made reference to this in a speech at Halifax on July 21, 1863 (Speeches and addresses chiefly on the subject of British-American Union, London, 1865, p. 64). Gladstone seems to have had an idea that Canada might be drawn in by the North. Another aspect of this idea is mentioned by Sir John Willison in his Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the Liberal Party: "The notion, which even Sir John Macdonald did not altogether reject, that the statesmen of the south favored the Reciprocity Treaty of 1854 in order to allay discontent in Canada, and thus avert the annexation of new states imbued with the northern sentiment against the system of black slavery" (vol. 2, p. 138).
- W. H. Russell found "a general impression that the Federals will keep their armies in good humor at the end of the war by annexing Canada if they can" (*Canada*, its defences, conditions and resources, Boston, 1865, p. 74). See also Villiers and Chesson, Anglo-American Relations, 1861-5, London, 1919, p. 146: "It seems pretty certain they [the North] would have wished to annex Canada if through our action they lost the rebellious states of the South."
- [15] The *Leader*, Toronto, Jan. 17 and 22, 1861.
- The *Leader*, Toronto, April 30, 1861. At the close of the Civil War, in its issue of April 11, 1865, the *Leader* said: "From the brave people of the South, struggling to achieve an independence which they conceived to be more desirable than union we have never withheld our sympathy." Again on April 13, 1865, the *Leader* said: "Their cause we looked upon as a just one. . . . A longing for national independence was a righteous longing."
- "Determined as Mr. Russell may be to write in all fairness of the progress of the Revolution, he will be apt to see more or less through Southern spectacles when penning his thoughts in the latitude of Charleston or Richmond."—The *Leader*, May 14, 1861.

- [18] Rhodes, *History of the United States*, vol. 3, p. 432, footnote.
- [19] "Russell's letters present a curious picture of uncertainty in the public mind, and though Russell's personal sympathies were with the North he seems to have felt something of contempt for a nation that did not appear prepared to fight for its own existence. . . . When once Mr. Russell had revealed to British readers how uncertain the Americans themselves were as to their rights under the Constitution it was very difficult for our people to understand the vehement patriotism and enthusiastic conviction in the righteousness of the Union Cause which followed so quickly the indecision of March and April."—Villiers and Chesson, Anglo-American Relations, 1861-5, London, 1919, p. 28.
- I have been told that this was particularly true of the cabinet-makers, many of them Germans, who came into Canada in large numbers as soon as the Civil War began.
- The *Leader* of April 24, 1861, reported the arrival in Toronto of E. F. Loveridge proprietor of the Troy, N.Y., *Evening News*, whose views on the war had run counter to those of his fellow citizens, and who had been run out of town. The *Leader* was inclined to sympathize with this victim of war fervour.
- In Montreal W. H. Russell found "a knot of Southern families, in a sort of American Siberia at a very comfortable hotel, who nurse their wrath against the Yankees to keep it warm and sustain each others' spirits. They form a nucleus for sympathizing society to cluster around" (*Canada: its defences, condition and resources*, Boston, 1865, p. 76).
- Quoted by the *Leader*, Toronto, May 2, 1861.
- "On the morning of Saturday, April 13, 1861, Hon. Mr. Howe announced to the House of Assembly that by a

telegram just received at the Merchant's Reading Room it appeared that Fort Sumter had been attacked, and was bombarded all day yesterday. He alluded at some length to the deep regret he felt at this melancholy news, so injurious to the interests of the civilized world. He was followed to the same effect by the Hon. Mr. Johnston, Dr. Tupper, Mr. Harrington, attorney-general, Mr. Henry and Mr. Tobin. Hon. Mr. Johnston suggested to the Hon. President of Council the propriety of the House passing some resolution expressing their sympathy in the calamities which have befallen the neighbouring states. Hon. Mr. Howe agreed to do so. When the House resumed at three o'clock Hon. Mr. Howe moved the following resolution in connection with the troubles in the United States: 'Resolved, that the House has heard with deep sorrow and regret of the outbreak of Civil War amongst their friends and neighbours in the United States; that this House, without expressing any opinion upon the points in controversy between the contending parties, sincerely lament that those who speak their language, and share their civilization should be shedding each other's blood, and desire to offer up their fervent prayers to the Father of the Universe for the restoration of peace."— House of Assembly Debates, 1861, sitting of Saturday, April 13.

- [25] McGee, Speeches and Addresses, chiefly on the subject of British-American Union, London, 1865, pages 12-32.
- McGee, Speeches and addresses, p. 34. Not only in Canada but in the United States as well McGee preached good-will. Speaking at Fort Popham, Maine, on Sept. 29, 1862, he said: "I speak the general settled sentiment of my countrymen of Canada when I say that in the extraordinary circumstances which have arisen for you, and for us also, in North America, there is no other feeling in Canada than a feeling of deep and sincere sympathy and friendliness towards the United States."
- "Sir John Macdonald told me that he had ascertained that there were 40,000 Canadian enlistments in the American

army in the course of the Civil War."—A Selection from Goldwin Smith's Correspondence, Toronto, n.d., p. 414.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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