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INFLUENCE OF THE WAR OF 1812

UPON THE SETTLEMENT OF THE CANADIAN WEST

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By Lawrence J. Burpee, Ottawa

At first sight one would be inclined to say that the War of 1812 had had no influence, could have had no influence, one way or the other, upon the settlement of what is to-day known as Western Canada—that is to say, that part of Canada lying west of the Great Lakes. The immense territory now constituting the provinces of Manitoba, Sackatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia, lay as completely outside the field of conflict as if it had been in South America. One may safely say that it did not enter into the calculations of the contestants on either side. It contained nothing for the one to attack or the other to defend. Believed at that time, and for many years thereafter, to be a wilderness unfit for civilized habitation, it was not valued by Canada nor coveted by the United States. In any event, it was much too remote from the centres of population on either side of the line to become an element in the conflict. The most westerly military station on the Canadian side was at St. Joseph's Island, near Sault Ste. Marie, and on the American side, the outpost of Michilimackinac, captured by the British soon after the declaration of war.

Nevertheless, although its rays were feeble enough, the dawn of the era of settlement in Western America was already breaking. At the very moment when Madison issued his Proclamation announcing that a state of war existed between the two countries, the pioneers of the Selkirk Settlement were on their way inland from York Factory to the Red River. The origin of that settlement is too well known to need any introduction here. It will be sufficient to note that Lord Selkirk sent out the first party of colonists from Scotland in 1811. They wintered at York Factory, and spent most of the summer of 1812 in making their painful way inland to Red River. A second party followed that year, reaching their destination in 1813. A third party sailed from the Orkneys in 1813, arriving at the Selkirk Settlement in 1814; finally a fourth contingent came out, in charge of Robert Semple, in 1815. Thus through-

out the entire period of the war, and for a year after the signing of the treaty of peace, Selkirk continued his laudable but badly-managed efforts to establish a colony in the very heart of the North American continent, more than a thousand miles from the nearest apology for a town, in any direction.

Whatever we may think of Selkirk, in his relations with the North West Company or otherwise, one must at least admire his courage. He seems to have stood at that day almost alone in his belief that the western prairies were capable of supporting a white population. Against him was not only the active hostility of the North West Company (and the Hudson's Bay Company would no doubt have been equally hostile had they not been closely associated with his interests in antagonism to the Canadian fur-traders), but also the passive hostility of public opinion both in England and America. The marvellous western country, which means so much to-day to both Canada and the United States, was believed a century ago—for that matter, half a century ago, as witnessed by much of the evidence embodied in the Hudson Bay Report of 1857, and other public documents of the same period—to be incapable of cultivation. It was said to be a semi-arctic region, throughout which if you dug down a foot or two you came to perpetual frost.

Here, then, we have the beginnings of a settlement on the banks of the Red River, born at the very time Canadians and Americans were fighting, with or without adequate cause, at the other end of the Great Lakes; but we are apparently as far as ever from establishing any influence that the one had upon the other. We know, indeed, that in 1816 Selkirk took out to his settlement a number of officers and soldiers of the disbanded de Meuron regiment, but the influence of these rather turbulent spirits was scarcely noticeable. They did not destroy the colony, and they certainly did not strengthen it. Eventually they moved south, making their homes in what later became the State of Minnesota.

We must, indeed, dig deeper if we are to find the real influence of the War of 1812 upon the settlement of the Canadian West; but first it will be convenient to note here the fact that in the same year that Lord Selkirk sent out his first colonists to Red River, and while they were still at York Factory, an expedition, sent out by John Jacob Astor, arrived at the mouth of the Columbia River, where its members built Astoria. As the Selkirk Colony became the nucleus of the prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, so out of Astoria, or perhaps rather because of Astoria, grew eventually the far western province of British Columbia.

Now to trace the connection between the War of 1812 and these nuclei of western settlements, or rather between the War of 1812 and the western settlements of which these infant communities were the nuclei. "The war," says Lucas, "was the national war of Canada. It did more than any other event or series of events could have done to reconcile the two rival races within Canada to each other. It was at once the supplement and the corrective of the American War of Independence. It did more than any other event could have done to demonstrate that colonial liberty and colonial patriotism did not leave the British Empire when the United States left it. The same spirit which had inspired and carried to success the American War of Independence was now enlisted on the side of Great Britain, and the successful defence of Canada by regiments from Great Britain and Canadian colonists combined, meant that a new British Empire was coming into being *pari passu* with the growth of a young nation within its limits. The War of 1812 determined that North America should not exclusively belong to the American Republic, that Great Britain should keep her place on the continent, but that she should keep it through this new community already on the high-road to legislative independence." So far as Canada is concerned, probably the most significant result of the War of 1812 was the immense stimulus it gave to the spirit of nationality throughout British North America. Canadians were fighting in defence of their homes; the imminence of the peril swamped all local jealousies; the war emphasized the need of union, if only as a measure of self-defence. Various causes delayed the event, but it is not difficult to trace a more or less direct connection between the War of 1812 and the union of the provinces in 1867. The confederation of the British North American provinces was but the culmination of a movement that had its birth in the War of 1812, and grew to maturity through the Rebellion of 1837, the Union of 1841, and the scheme for a Maritime Union that immediately preceded confederation.

Under the terms of the British North America Act provision was made for the admission of British Columbia, Rupert's Land, and the North-Western Territory. Steps were at once taken for the acquisition of the western country, but it was found necessary to buy out the rights of the Hudson's Bay Company. After prolonged negotiation, the Company finally agreed to accept £300,000, and in 1869 an act was passed for the temporary government of Rupert's Land and the Territories. The following year the new province of Manitoba was created, and in 1871 British Columbia was admitted, the terms of union providing among others things for the construction of a transcontinental railway.

These steps toward the rounding out of the new Dominion were the inevitable consequences of the Confederation movement, and had been contemplated years before Confederation itself became an accomplished fact. The records of the period, however, show clearly enough that the western country was admitted not because it was believed at the time to possess any very great value in itself, but rather because such far-sighted statesmen as Sir John Macdonald realized that it was absolutely necessary to the future welfare of Canada that her territory should extend from ocean to ocean. What the United States had failed to do in 1812, they might still accomplish in the seventies. With the Civil War off their hands, they were entering upon a period of western expansion. The new Western States were rapidly filling up; Alaska had been purchased from Russia; and, if Canada held back, it was quite within the realm of possibility that the United States might step in and absorb the prairie country between the Great Lakes and the mountains. That done, British Columbia would almost inevitably follow, and Canada would be confined to the Atlantic-side of the continent. The ultimate destiny of such a Canada one would not care to predict. Certainly the fate of the country would be problematical. It could not hope to reach at any time the stature of a great nation. It must forever be overshadowed by its gigantic neighbour; and American statesmen might then indeed have had some ground for the belief that a few short years would see the peaceful accomplishment of what armed force had failed to do in 1812—the extension of American sovereignty over the whole continent of North America. Nevertheless it must not be forgotten that, while statesmen were directly responsible for bringing in the western provinces, they could not have acted without a widespread sentiment of expansion throughout Eastern Canada—and this sentiment was directly traceable to the influence of the War of 1812.

The project of a transcontinental railway, a vital link in the chain of Confederation, and in the settlement of Western Canada, had been discussed for many years, from every possible point of view. It had been advocated on economic, strategic, and national grounds; it had been pressed for by British Columbia as essential to the safety and welfare of the province, and by the settlers on the Red River as the only effective means of colonizing the western prairies. It was finally accepted by Canadian statesmen as a work absolutely essential to the expansion of the Dominion. One need not attempt to prove what is self-evident, that the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway was a work of supreme importance, to the west and to the east, to Canada and to the British Empire. It made possible the peopling of the western provinces;

it created a trade route between Eastern and Western Canada; it consolidated the Dominion; and it added materially to the strength of the Empire. To-day, when we have a second and a third transcontinental railway approaching completion, with the Hudson Bay route and the Georgian Bay Canal in contemplation, we find it hard to realize what the Canadian Pacific Railway once meant to Canada, from the point of view of western settlement, and also from the wider point of view of national development. The following, from an American statesman, William Henry Seward, written when the Canadian Pacific was still a thing of the future, is not without interest at the present day, making allowances for a certain amount of exaggeration:

"British America," he says, "from a colonial dependency, would assume a controlling rank in the world. To her other nations would be tributary, and in vain would the United States attempt to be her rival, for she never could dispute with her the possession of the Asiatic commerce nor the power which that commerce confers."

The Toronto Globe, not usually much given to enthusiasm, had this to say in its issue of Feb. 3, 1871: "Our rulers will be traitors to their country and to British connection if they lose a single session in making it practicable and convenient for settlers to get to Fort Garry through our own territory, and in putting things in a fair way for the Canadian Pacific Railway. It is a question not merely of convenience but of national existence. It must be pushed through at whatever expense. We believe it can be pushed through not only without being a burden pecuniarily upon Canada, but with an absolute profit in every point of view. Without such a line a great British North America would turn out an unsubstantial dream; with it and with ordinary prudence and wisdom on the part of her statesmen, it will be a great, glorious and inevitable reality."

This, however, is getting rather outside my subject. To get back to the initial question, I have attempted to show—although it is nothing more than the mere skeleton of an argument—that the War of 1812 had a distinct influence upon the effective settlement of Western Canada; that out of that war grew a deep-rooted and ever-increasing spirit of Canadian nationality; that from that spirit proceeded the Confederation movement which culminated in the British North America Act of 1867; that as an essential feature of Confederation the western country was brought into the Dominion; and that with the admission of the western provinces came the project of a transcontinental railway—the final link in the chain of western settlement.

I have made no attempt to follow possible lines of influence on the American side, but it might be rather interesting to study the effect of the War of 1812 upon the settlement of the tier of northwestern States along the boundary, and the possible reaction, one way or the other, upon the development of our Northwest. In 1812 Michigan and Illinois only are represented in the population tables of the United States; Wisconsin does not appear until 1840; Minnesota until 1850; and North Dakota and Montana until 1870. Michigan increased from a population of 4,762 in 1810 to 8,896 in 1820; 31,639 in 1830; 212,267 in 1840; 397,654 in 1850; 749,113 in 1860. Illinois grew even more rapidly. She had 12,282 in 1810; 55,211 in 1820; 157,445 in 1830; 476,183 in 1840; 851,470 in 1850, and 1,711,951 in 1860. Wisconsin, starting with 30,945, in 1840, jumped to 305,391 in the next decade; and 775,881 in 1860. These three States could each boast of more than a million white inhabitants in 1870, Michigan having 1,184,059; Illinois, 2,539,891, and Wisconsin, 1,054,670. Minnesota, with 6,077 in 1850, had 172,023 in 1860, and 439,706 in 1870. North Dakota is credited with 2,405 white inhabitants in 1870; and Montana, 20,595.

The real growth of population on the Canadian side was of much later date. According to Dr. Bryce, the Red River settlers numbered in 1815 about 283. Alexander Ross, in his "Red River Settlement," gives the total population of the Colony in 1849 as 5391; and in 1855, about 6,500. A statistical account of the Red River Colony, included in the Hudson Bay Report of 1857, gives the population in 1849 as 5,291, and in 1856 as 6,523. The number of whites and half-breeds in the Hudson Bay Territories in 1856 is stated in the same Report to be about 11,000. J. J. Hargrave, in his "Red River," gives the population of Red River, including the Prairie Portage, in 1870, as about 12,800. This included whites and half-breeds, and also Indians within the boundaries of the Colony. Another authority gives the white population between Lake Superior and the Rocky Mountains, in 1871, as 12,225. In 1881, Manitoba and the Territories had a white population of 118,706; and in 1891—six years after the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway—the population had increased to 260,573.

One other fascinating, though probably not very substantial, line of influence between the War of 1812 and the settlement of the Canadian West, is through the western fur-trade. There are several possible approaches to the question, and I shall only attempt to very briefly suggest a few of them. On general principles it may be assumed that the fur-trade was inimicable to settlement—or if you are a fur-trader, you

may state the case the other way if you please. In any event, the perpetuation of the monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company, through the retention by Great Britain of the western territories north of 49 degrees, in the conclusion of peace, may be taken to have delayed for many decades the effective settlement of Rupert's Land. And yet, on the other hand, the Hudson's Bay Company, in one way or another, had a great deal to do with the early settlement of Vancouver Island and British Columbia.

Another point: The Treaty of Ghent, in 1814, finally gave Grand Portage, and with it, the old route of the fur-traders, to the United States. The North West Company thenceforth were confined to the Kaministikwia route. Fort William became for a time the recognized headquarters of the fur-trade. Eventually there grew up at the mouth of the Kaministikwia the twin cities of Fort William and Port Arthur, destined to rival Duluth, and perhaps Chicago, as a mighty inland port, and a connecting link between Eastern Canada and the great west.

One more point: In 1816, when the animosity aroused by the war was still keen, John Jacob Astor secured the passage of an act of Congress restricting trade with the Indians south of 49 degrees to citizens of the United States. This measure was designed, in the language of an American writer, "to put the North West Company out of business on American territory." The North West people sold out to Astor and his associates of the American Fur Company, and confined their operations to the Canadian side of the boundary. The American Fur Company energetically pushed forward into the territory east and west of the Mississippi. Through their influence, military posts were established at Prairie du Chien, Fort Snelling, and elsewhere. Settlement rapidly followed on the American side, coming to a standstill when it reached the boundary line. Meanwhile, the North West Company, confined to British territory, found itself checked in every direction by the Hudson's Bay Company. Relations became more and more strained, until finally the only solution was the union of the two companies in 1821. Thenceforward there was peace in the vast territories of the fur-trader. But what of the effect of all this on colonization? Did it tend to accelerate, or to retard, the settlement of Western Canada? That is too big a problem to attempt to discuss in this paper, which does not profess to include anything more than a few more or less disjointed notes.