

1864 Paradoxes noted in 1964 party climax

(Editor's note: As a salute to Charlottetown, P.E.I., on the 100th anniversary of the Charlottetown Conference, British American Oil Co. Ltd., produced a booklet telling "What Canada Celebrates in 1964". It was written by the editor of the Charlottetown Guardian and The Evening Patriot and is reproduced here with the permission of the company.)

By BURTON LEWIS

There is much of paradox in the story of Canadian Confederation. At first glance staging the opening act in the national celebration of its centenary, in Prince Edward Island, throughout 1964, may appear the most striking paradox of all.

After all, 1964 is only 97 years past, after official accomplishment of Confederation, and Prince Edward Island, a province which refused to enter for six further years.

Yet what is being celebrated, of course, involves all of Canada—the first Confederation Conference of the Fathers of Confederation, the "coming together" of the leading public men from what were then scattered, struggling North American colonies with separate British allegiance—the initial pact which, through the years, continued to shape Canada as a great northern nation.

Through that Conference which opened at Charlottetown on September 1, 1864, the seeds of federal union for Canada were successfully, irrevocably planted, even though extended, difficult travail, almost three years of it, was to follow before Confederation was achieved.

And these are things that can be recalled in Charlottetown. There is no part of Canada where the pre-Confederation past lives so closely with the present—where history from that era stands so ready to breathe down the neck of the observer who is alert to it—as in Prince Edward Island.

During their eight days in the province the meetings of the Fathers of Confederation, whether serious or social, are known to have taken them into exactly six buildings. Five of them remain in use today for almost the same purposes as in 1864. In all the rest of Canada there cannot be found as many landmarks associated with them directly, as a body, as survivors in good condition in Charlottetown and its environs.

On the same public square where just as rises the first memorial to her nationhood ever erected by Canada, the magnificent new Fathers of Confederation Memorial Centre, there still stands the venerable building in which effect was given to the concept which has since guided Canada.

This is the Provincial Building, first occupied in 1847, and it remains the seat of the provincial government. The table around which the founders of Canada gathered still dominates the room, preserved as the Confederation Chamber, in which they passed their most serious discussions.

Within it also can be seen the guest book which the chief architect of Confederation, during a later visit, registered himself as "John A. Macdonald, Cabinet Maker." A half dozen blocks away, retaining graciousness to match its age, is Government House where entertainment provided Canada's creators was so lavish that it verged on revelry. Today as in 1864, and as it has been since 1855, it is the residence of the province's lieutenant governor.

And three of the four residences in which those who attended the first Confederation Conference enjoyed further hospitality—long hours of festive eating and drinking at two dinners and two luncheons—continue to grace the Charlottetown area.

So much, then, for that original paradox. With Confederation regarded as a single chapter, and probably the greatest chapter in this country's past, Prince Edward Island remains linked with it, and its share in its opening pages, are incomparable.

PARADOXICAL SITUATION
Paradox in plenty remains, however. Everything the Charlottetown Conference achieved, for instance, has to be credited to the fact that the official delegates, from Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, all but disregarded the only subject that was officially before them.

There is room for doubt, indeed, as to when, if ever, the Conference would have been held on the basis of its declared purposes of considering the possibility of a legislative union between the three Maritime colonies (N.B., N.S. and P.E.I.) and the introduction of a new, unofficial theme.

Union government of the Province of Canada (formerly known as Upper and Lower Canada) but then joined in a most imperfect union as Canada East and Canada West, or the Canadian sought permission to submit unofficially a plan for federal union of the entire North American continent.

Arrangements were made for the meeting and some suggested that Charlottetown was chosen as its locale in part to assure representation from Prince Edward Island, with a population which remained predominantly opposed to union of any sort for many years.

As for the attitude carried to the meeting by Prince Edward Island whether on federal or Maritime union, it certainly differed from that of any other colony represented in ways which explain why it appeared to drag its heels and was last of the group to join Confederation.

Yet it is unlikely that the test of history will find anything as fully perverse or wrong-headed, much less congenitally backward, about Island positions in the Confederation era. Islanders were at the beginning of their exercise of responsible government, which had come to them much later than to any of the other North American colonies involved. Their largest problem, absentee landlordism, was entirely different from any issue remaining in the other colonies and the Colonial Office still was thwarting Islanders to cure it legislatively.

Despite proposals advanced at the Charlottetown Conference, the official Confederation resolutions adopted at Quebec, carried to London for implementation, assured no cure for this fundamental problem, so long as it remained unresolved, the little colony had reasons for regarding everything else—even the prospect of becoming part of a new nation—as largely irrelevant.

Besides, in the nature of things, an island has to think mainly of a land gap of some 500 miles, soon to be closed by the Intercolonial Railway, stood between the other Maritime colonies and the Province of Canada with which they were to join. But an additional gap of water, often frozen as a barrier to "continuous communications," was not easily bridged in the thinking of those who governed Prince Edward Island in the 1860's era, or Newfoundland when Confederation was rejected there.

P.E.I. JOINED LATE
Only later political and financial reasons, plus explicit action on land tenure problems and added constitutional guarantees, carried the province into Confederation in 1873. But the struggle over all these matters was well ahead, as the Charlottetown Conference opened. At that time, as described by P.B. Waite, author of the Life and Times of Confederation, there was a simpler situation in which "Prince Edward Islanders were determined that Charlottetown would remain the capital of something, if only of P.E.I."

As leader of the opposition in the province and later to become premier and a Father of Confederation, George Cole's own argued it would be a desirable capital for any new federal union, to enable "our Canadian friends . . . to spend a month or two here in public business, if only to escape the fever and ague of their own Province."

And Donald G. Creighton has written that the Conference reached a complete impasse on the Maritime union proposal because of "Prince Edward Island's impossible demand that the capital . . . be established at Charlottetown." So that is it may, Jonathan McCully, a Nova Scotia delegate, summed up by saying action on Maritime union not only was left unfinished but "unbegun."

It was left that way because sentiment, at least for the time being, swung unanimously behind the federal union plan espoused by the men from the Maritime colonies—John A. Macdonald, George Brown, Georges Cartier and Alexander Galt in particular.

No minutes were kept of the gathering but whatever it was the Canadians offered—whether a vision, great coyness argument, eloquence, extraordinary warmth of camaraderie, or a combination of all—prevailed at Charlottetown to establish the idea of Confederation for the first time as political reality.

should Prince Edward Island have a smaller representation than Montreal?"

Less than nine months after the sweeping but unbinding accord was reached at Charlottetown the colonial legislature almost unanimously registered its rejection of "a Union which . . . we believe would prove politically, commercially and financially disastrous."

Just two months after the close of the Quebec Conference, which gave formal shape to what the Charlottetown Conference created in spirit, on December 29, 1864, he had this to say in his paper:

"The cause of Confederation happily does not depend on the will of the small politicians of the small Island of Prince Edward. If the cause be fought with success on the main land, its consummation cannot be delayed through the petulance of this little place . . . But we cannot resist smiling at the exceeding simplicity of those who think that the other Provinces will confederate while the British Government must go to the expense of keeping up a protectorate over this patch of sand bank in the Gulf of St. Lawrence."

Whelan died shortly after Confederation was achieved but, on December 10, 1867, at that junction Prince Edward Island had provided an atmosphere in which previously disparate colonies were able to bring forth an authentic national spirit ahead of nationhood, and even though no immediate action to accommodate its roots was found in the province where that spirit emerged.

WHERE CANADA BEGAN
But what was left in Charlottetown was a permanent special character as the place, in every real sense, "where Canada began," and this is what the country is now celebrating.

It is a celebration which readily encourages each person who becomes exposed to it. Even complicated history expresses itself clearly, simply and delightfully in a setting which includes both the buildings where it was shaped and that history while epitomizing it.

In these surroundings the whole broad story of "tough old Canada" can be seen and felt as stemming from what happened in Charlottetown in 1864—the official birth of Confederation, July 1, 1867, and its fleshing out—creation of Manitoba in 1870—entry of British Columbia in 1871—and Prince Edward Island in 1873—provincial status for Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905—the rounding out of the union with Newfoundland's entry in 1949.

It was within a special quality of hospitality, which remains as one of the island's surest distinctions, that the start was made; and that public men, while meeting largely as strangers, found enough confidence in each other to form the bond which has grown and endures as the main strength of nationhood.

Its endurance in face of fierce and continuing tests tells not only of the worth of what was envisioned at Charlottetown, but of the warmth and depth of friendships created there; and of the resulting trust, one for the other, between men who possessed enough of greatness to transcend their fallibilities.

Some what prematurely a national sentiment, which is not a wish unaccompanied by flattery, George Brown, as a spokesman for the Province of Canada, gave this summing up:

"Whether as the result of our eloquence or of the goodness of our champagne the delegates vlogged merrily, and the banes of matrimony between all the provinces of B.N.A. have been formally proclaimed . . . the union was thereupon formally completed and proclaimed."

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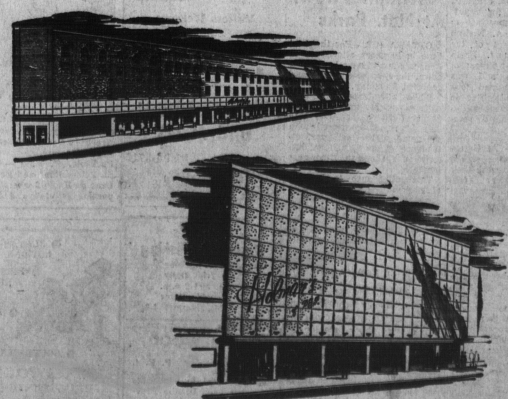
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During this century this firm has constantly met the new challenges that changing times always present and we have grown as our country has grown. Our success in "guaranteeing satisfaction" is evident in the fact that we have kept the confidence of the buying public and as we look ahead the prospect is good for Canada and for Holman's.



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