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## The Backbone of Canada

C. P. Stacey

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# THE BACKBONE OF CANADA

COLONEL C. P. STACEY

*Historical Section, Army Headquarters, Ottawa*  
*President, Canadian Historical Association*

The sequence of events which I am going to comment on this evening may be said to have begun somewhat indefinitely in the earliest days of the French régime in Canada; but it ended at a perfectly definite time and place, on November 7, 1885, in Eagle Pass, when Donald A. Smith drove the last spike of the C. P. R. It is the story of the process that produced a truly national highway from sea to sea — a highway built entirely through Canadian territory, and one that could be used at every season of the year.

Much of this story is almost painfully familiar. The building of the Canadian Pacific lies within the purview of the poets, at one end of the literary scale, and the writers of school histories at the other. But that was only the final episode in a long succession, and some of the earlier ones are probably not quite so well known. The subject as a whole seems to merit the consideration of this Association; for in Canada more than in most countries the history of the building of the state is the history of the development of communications.

It was only after the reorganization of North America at the end of the American Revolution that the problem entered a really acute phase, and it is at that point that I propose to take up the tale. I shall organize my commentary geographically, by sections, beginning in the east; but in the nature of things, in this case, a geographical arrangement is, very largely, a chronological one too.

## I

The new and smaller British North America that emerged from the convulsion of the Revolution consisted of two regional groupings. One, the Province of Quebec, lay in the Laurentic Basin; it was shortly to expand westward and split into the two provinces of Upper and Lower Canada. The other was the group of island and mainland colonies on the Atlantic coast, five in number after 1784. Looking at British North America in national terms, which very few people did at that time, the basic national problem was communication between these two regions. Indeed, good communication between Quebec and the seaboard was simply a condition of existence for Canada as a British colony. As long as the United States was actually or potentially hostile, and its population was a dozen times that of British North America, the security of Canada would depend upon the ability of forces from the United Kingdom to reach the Upper St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes.

British sea power ensured the safety of transatlantic communications and, as a corollary, the safety of the Maritime colonies. It also ensured the communications between Britain and Canada, and between

Halifax and Quebec — but only during the summer season. For about five months of every year, the St. Lawrence was sealed by ice; and the regularity with which difficulties with the United States took place during this period is a striking feature of our history.

In these circumstances, the state of overland communication between Canada and the Atlantic ports was a matter of fundamental importance; and the extraordinary thing is that the Britons who negotiated the peace with the American colonies in 1782-83 apparently never gave it a thought. There was an overland communication, well known if not well travelled. It ran up the St. John valley to that river's junction with the Madawaska; up the Madawaska to Lake Temiscouata and across the lake; and thence across what was sometimes called the "Grand Portage", some 36 miles of rough and rocky wilderness, to reach the St. Lawrence at Notre Dame du Portage above Rivière du Loup. This portage is indicated on Mitchell's 1755 map of North America by the words "Carriages to Canada"; but it is certain that no carriage had ever passed over it. During the last stages of the American Revolution, Governor Haldimand used it for sending dispatches to Halifax, New York and London, and in 1783 he took steps to improve the portage road to the point where it could be used by laden horses.<sup>1</sup> But this escaped the notice of British diplomatists, who in their eagerness to make peace (which the House of Commons had formally demanded) completely failed to consider the permanent military security of British North America. Thirty years later, after another war, Lord Castlereagh remarked that the treaty of 1783 had been "very hastily and improvidently framed in this respect".<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to common opinion, the weakness of the settlement did not consist merely in the fact that it interposed a great wedge of American territory between the Maritime colonies and Canada. It is true that this permanently condemned the British colonies to a roundabout line of communication; but since the only existing line of communication was itself very roundabout this was not then a serious practical difficulty. What mattered was the fact that even this route — the sole winter communication between the Atlantic seaboard and Quebec — was not merely threatened but actually severed by the terms of the treaty as they appear to have been understood by both sides at the time. On the "King George map" from the Royal Archives, the red line marked "Boundary as described by Mr. Oswald" actually runs through the words "Carriages to Canada" and the broken line marking the Grand Portage; and it throws Lake Temiscouata and much of the neighbouring territory into the United States.<sup>3</sup> In a military sense such a frontier was merely impossible. Here is much

<sup>1</sup>Historical Section, General Staff, *A History of the Organization, Development and Services of the Military and Naval Forces of Canada* . . . (3 vols. published, Ottawa, 1919-21), III, 237-41.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Vane, Marquess of Londonderry, ed., *Correspondence, Despatches and Other Papers, of Viscount Castlereagh* (London, 1853), X, 70. On the negotiations of 1782-3, see A. L. Burt, *The Old Province of Quebec* (Toronto and Minneapolis, 1933), 329-34.

<sup>3</sup>Facsimile of King George Map, Map Division, Public Archives of Canada. The handwriting is said to be George III's.

of the explanation of the long Maine boundary dispute. When in the fulness of time the true facts were brought home to later British governments, they were driven to undignified expedients to repair the damage done by Shelburne's ministry. They were in fact obliged to argue that the treaty did not mean what the British representatives who negotiated it pretty obviously intended it to mean. This is not to say that the later governments were necessarily dishonest. One suspects that they found it impossible to believe that anybody could really have been so stupid as Richard Oswald and his superiors were in 1782-83.

However, it is only fair to say that most of the Canadian historians and publicists who have criticized Oswald and Shelburne have made much the same basic mistake that those gentlemen themselves made: namely, they have failed to see the national importance of the Temiscouata road, or the fact that this road was the most vital interest that was at stake.<sup>4</sup> They have considered the boundary dispute, as a rule, only in terms of square miles of territory, though much of the territory in question is of very little value even today. Our historical atlases all contain handsome maps of the Maine dispute. These invariably illustrate with neat coloured lines the various British and American claims; they sometimes show the boundary proposed by the King of the Netherlands in 1831; they show the final settlement; in fact, they show everything except the feature that was the real hub of the controversy, the Temiscouata road. One cannot help feeling that the compilers of these works have been somewhat in the position of Old Kaspar: *What they (nearly) fought each other for, They cannot well make out.*

It was the War of 1812 that first directed real attention to the importance of the Temiscouata route. The road now did more than provide for the mere transit of dispatches. It enabled officers whose services were urgently required in Canada to make their way thither during the winter months. Most of the journey had to be made on snowshoes.<sup>5</sup> Even so, the route also served for the movement of large bodies of troops. The 104th Regiment made a famous and arduous march over it through the snow early in 1813; and the following winter another battalion, and a party of 200 seamen for the Great Lakes, similarly passed over it into Canada.<sup>6</sup> The British government's increasing sense of its importance is reflected in the orders given Sir John Sherbrooke in 1814 to "occupy so much of the District of Maine, as shall assure an uninterrupted communication between Halifax & Quebec".<sup>7</sup> This led to the occupation of Castine. (The port dues

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., Thomas Hodgins, *British and American Diplomacy affecting Canada, 1782-1899* (Toronto, 1900).

<sup>5</sup>Sir George Head, *Forest Scenes and Incidents in the Wilds of North America* (London, 1829), 95 ff.

<sup>6</sup>William Kingsford, *History of Canada*, VIII (Toronto, 1895), 286-7. M. A. Pope; "The March of the 104th Foot from Fredericton to Quebec, 1813" (*Canadian Defence Quarterly*, July 1930) contains a contemporary account of the march over the Temiscouata portage. *Report on Canadian Archives*, 1896, State Papers, Lower Canada, 18, 22, Prevost to Bathurst, Jan. 14 and Mar. 12, 1814.

<sup>7</sup>P.A.C., Series C, vol. 685, Sherbrooke to Prevost, Aug. 2, 1814. Cf. A. T. Mahan, *Sea Power in its Relations to the War of 1812* (2 vols., London, 1905), II, 353-4, and George F. G. Stanley, "British Operations on the Penobscot in 1814" (*Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, XIX, 1940).

collected there by the British were later used to found Dalhousie University.) It seems quite possible that the occupation of eastern Maine may have been intended to build up a claim for rectification of the boundary in the peace treaty, such as would secure the Temiscouata road beyond all question.

This hope was disappointed, and in the next period the dispute waxed hotter. The British government now recognized that it had a decisive strategic interest in the disputed territory; and the gradual advance of settlement added to the danger of a collision. The rebellions in Canada in 1837, and the border troubles that followed, again underlined the absolute indispensability of the Temiscouata road to British interests. The crisis arose, as usual, after the close of navigation; but the road, which though still very bad had now been improved to the point where sleighs could be used on it, was the means of reinforcing Canada from the Maritime Provinces. Three battalions of infantry and a company of artillery came up through the New Brunswick woods<sup>8</sup>; and the knowledge that they were coming enabled Sir John Colborne to send part of his small regular force to protect the menaced frontier of Upper Canada. When a second rebellion, combined with invasion by sympathizers in the United States, took place a year later, another battalion made the trip over the Temiscouata route.<sup>9</sup> Colborne had already pointed the moral for the benefit of London: "The value of the communication by the Portage to the valley of the St. Lawrence should never be forgotten in the adjustment of the boundary question".<sup>10</sup>

Immediately after this demonstration the boundary dispute in fact entered its final and worst phase. Conflicts of jurisdiction between Maine and New Brunswick in the disputed territory led to the bloodless but very dangerous episode known as the Aroostook War. On the British side this crisis was marked by the movement of troops to protect the overland communication,<sup>11</sup> which was finally safeguarded by a continuous chain of military posts. Lord Sydenham wrote to Sir John Harvey in November 1840, "My instructions from Her Majesty's Government are not to permit Maine to occupy or possess Land to the North of the St. John's and to maintain in perfect security, the Communication by the Madawaska between Fredericton and Quebec; whatever, therefore, is indispensable for that purpose, must be done."<sup>12</sup> It was fortunate, in these circumstances, that the "encroachments" of the men of Maine were limited to the south bank of the St. John. Had they attempted to take post upon the British road, instead of merely adjacent to it, it would have been very difficult to avoid war.

Many, indeed, thought that the British attitude made war actually inevitable. In 1839 the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Com-

<sup>8</sup>"The Canadian Revolt" (*United Service Journal*, 1838, Part II), 154. Cf. P.A.C., Series C, vol. 1272, Colborne to Lord Fitzroy Somerset, Feb. 10, 1838.

<sup>9</sup>*Historical Record of the Eleventh, or, the North Devon Regiment of Foot* . . . (London, 1845), 85.

<sup>10</sup>P.A.C., Series C, vol. 1272, Colborne to Somerset, Jan. 25, 1838.

<sup>11</sup>See Harvey's dispatches of February and March 1839, P.A.C., C.O. 188, vol. 200.

<sup>12</sup>Nov. 23, 1840: P.A.C., Series Q, vol. 274 pt. 1.

mittee in the United States House of Representatives wrote to the American Minister to England that he felt there could be no compromise so long as the United States admitted the right of Maine to interfere, and so long as the British were determined to have a road. "Indeed", he wrote, "Mr. Fox [the British Minister] once said to me very significantly that they could not do without that road. Now when people have made up their minds all argument is idle wind."<sup>13</sup> It was to the credit of Daniel Webster, who became Secretary of State in 1841, that he drew a different conclusion from the facts. He appears to have come to the view that since the British considered the road essential to the mere existence of British North America, and since they had made it amply clear that they would fight rather than give it up, the sensible thing was to let them have it. Accordingly, he approached Britain with a proposal which contained the germs of settlement — to abandon the intricate and fruitless argument over the interpretation of the treaty of 1783 and to treat for a "conventional" or compromise line. The negotiations between himself and Lord Ashburton began with the recognition on Ashburton's side that Britain's one essential interest was the maintenance of communications between the provinces, while Webster on his acknowledged "the general justice and propriety of this object".<sup>14</sup> And the treaty which they made did in fact secure to British North America the Temiscouata-Madawaska road.

Thus at the end of the long dispute the most truly vital British and Canadian interest was safeguarded. There is no reason whatever to believe that Ashburton, given the material he had to work with, could have got a better bargain. He had a very clear view of the elements of the situation, and his judgement of it seems rather sounder, in the light of facts as we know them today, than that of the generals who advised the British government. They particularly wanted to push the boundary as far from the St. Lawrence as possible in that section where it parallels the river; whereas Ashburton thought it more desirable to get land south of the St. John, in the Madawaska Settlement.<sup>15</sup> In the region about which the generals were so sensitive, Ashburton, acting under instructions, did obtain a "better" frontier than that of the Dutch award of 1831. In this area today there is still a good hundred miles of the international boundary which is uncrossed by a single practicable road. Whether the line ran a few miles farther north or south through this wilderness was comparatively unimportant. There is no doubt that in the matter of the Maine boundary British diplomacy was guilty of a crime against Canada; but

<sup>13</sup>Library of Congress, Stevenson Papers, Benjamin C. Howard to Andrew Stevenson, May 30, 1839. I owe this reference to Professor A. B. Corey. See his *The Crisis of 1830-1842 in Canadian-American Relations* (New Haven, 1941), 114, 159.

<sup>14</sup>U. S. Senate Documents, 27th Congress, 3rd Session, No. 1, pp. 34, 39, 44, Ashburton to Webster, June 13 and 21, 1842; Webster to Ashburton, July 8, 1842.

<sup>15</sup>J. R. Baldwin, "The Ashburton-Webster Boundary Settlement" (*Canadian Historical Association, Report of the Annual Meeting*, 1938). E. D. Adams, "Lord Ashburton and the Treaty of Washington" (*American Historical Review*, XVII, July, 1912.)

it was committed, not by Lord Ashburton in 1842, but by Richard Oswald and his chiefs sixty years earlier.

The road had been saved, but only by a hair's-breadth. For a long distance it lay either directly on the boundary or within a very few miles of it. In case of war, it was clear, only the presence of a large force, and probably the occupation of a large extent of American territory, would ensure traffic against interruption. It was natural, therefore, that attempts should be made to develop a road more remote from the border. As early as 1829 the Lower Canada legislature undertook the construction of the Kempt Road across the base of the Gaspé peninsula. It ran from Metis on the St. Lawrence by way of Lake Matapedia to the Restigouche, whence there was road communication with Halifax. But settlement along this route obstinately declined to materialize. The road was never really completed and was soon slipping back into the wilderness from which it had been cut.<sup>16</sup> No attempt was ever made to use it to move troops.

In 1844, with the boundary settled, another road project was set on foot. A survey was made of a cross-country route running from the Bend (now Moncton) to Grand Falls on the upper St. John, and thence generally paralleling the Temiscouata one a few miles to the east.<sup>17</sup> The British government asked Canada and New Brunswick to help with this scheme, and they were at first disposed to do so;<sup>18</sup> but then the idea of an Intercolonial Railway arose and pushed it into the background;<sup>19</sup> and since the railway scheme afterwards collapsed the net result was nil. New Brunswick in the early thirties had had a great plan of its own, fostered by Governor Sir Archibald Campbell: the "Royal Road", a direct cross-country line between Fredericton and Grand Falls, both shorter and more secure than the route by the St. John valley. But this turned out to be another scheme that was never carried to completion.<sup>20</sup> Today there is still no cross-country highway between Fredericton and Grand Falls.

The breakdown of the Intercolonial Railway plan in 1852 — due mainly to the unwillingness of the British government to assist any railway not following a route remote from the frontier — and the failure to build a good highway by such a route, meant that when the next great Anglo-American crisis came, in 1861, British North America was still dependent for its most essential strategic communication on the old Temiscouata portage road. The news that an American cruiser had taken Confederate envoys off the British steamer

<sup>16</sup>P.A.C., Series G, vol. 123, p. 247, W. H. Griffin to T. A. Stayner, Dec. 14, 1845. On the construction of the Kempt Road, see Aylmer to Goderich, Apr. 18, 1831, *ibid.*, vol. 380, p. 36. See also J. S. Martell, "Intercolonial Communications, 1840-1867" (*Canadian Historical Association Report* 1938,) 51-2.

<sup>17</sup>P.A.C., Map Division, Sir James Alexander's "Outline map showing . . . the proposed Military Road from Quebec to Halifax", April 3, 1845. The map in vol. II of Alexander's *L'Acadie* (2 vols., London, 1849) puts the proposed road on the wrong side of the lake.

<sup>18</sup>Documents in P.A.C., Correspondence of Governor-General's Secretary, No. 4265.

<sup>19</sup>P.A.C., Series G, vol. 124, p. 74, Gladstone to Falkland, April 18, 1846.

<sup>20</sup>See the correspondence in P.A.C., New Brunswick, Despatches Sent, IV. Cf. *Journal of the House of Assembly of the Province of New Brunswick . . . 1836*, Appendix No. 3, and Index p. xvii (Bill no. 111).

*Trent* arrived just as the St. Lawrence navigation was about to close. The British government ordered over 11,000 troops to British North America. A desperate attempt was made to get those destined for Canada up the St. Lawrence before the ice closed it; but this failed, and in the early weeks of 1862 the largest military force ever to use the old overland route was passing over it in sleighs. Nearly 7,000 men with 18 guns were thus sent into Canada at this time.<sup>21</sup> At the same time the attempt to produce an alternative road was renewed, this time successfully. The Canadian government had, in fact, begun in 1857 to build a new road from the St. Lawrence to the Restigouche by the Matapédia valley, following somewhat the same line as the Kempt Road. At the time of the *Trent* affair the British government took a great interest in advancing the enterprise. It was completed in 1867,<sup>22</sup> and is now Quebec Highway No. 6.

After the crisis of 1861 no British or British American statesman could doubt that an intercolonial railway was a necessity. Strategic facts, demonstrated once more by the events of that year, reinforced the commercial pressure that had long been felt. It is not surprising that the sixty-eighth of the Seventy-Two Resolutions passed by the Quebec Conference provided that the new Dominion should arrange without delay for the construction of a railway between Rivière du Loup and Truro; and this undertaking was written into the British North America Act.

After a great deal of argument, the question of the route to be followed was settled in 1868, on the recommendation of Sandford Fleming, in favour of the north shore of New Brunswick. Fleming's letter to Sir John Macdonald indicates that his advice was based almost entirely on commercial considerations and particularly on the hope of obtaining through traffic by connecting with a port on the Bay of Chaleur.<sup>23</sup> This rather far-fetched idea may have had some influence with the Canadian government. It added weight to the military argument in favour of placing the line just as far from the frontier as possible. The British government had favoured such a line since the moment when the railway was first spoken of; and that government's financial support was vital to the project. It must be remembered that in 1868 the Fenian Brotherhood was still very active in the United States; the *Alabama* claims were still unsettled; and an Anglo-American war was still a definite possibility. In these circumstances, the line by the Matapédia and the North Shore made good sense. However, by the time it was completed, in 1876, there had already been a fundamental change for the better in Anglo-American relations. Many Canadian soldiers have travelled over the tracks of the old Intercolonial,

<sup>21</sup>C. P. Stacey, *Canada and the British Army, 1846-1871* (London, 1936), 120-22.

<sup>22</sup>P.A.C., Map Division, "Plan of the Metapédias Road from Ste. Flavie, on the St. Lawrence to Cross Point, at the head of Baie des Chaleurs . . ." P. A. C., Series G, vol. 166, p. 511, Newcastle to Monck, Dec. 28, 1861; and see documents in Series C, vol. 1671, pt. I.

<sup>23</sup>P.A.C., Macdonald Papers, "Railways", vol. 2, pp. 6 ff., Fleming to Macdonald, March 3, 1868.



on their way to or from battlefields in Europe; but it has never had to serve the needs of defence against the United States.<sup>24</sup>

That this railway was a political as well as a military necessity no one can doubt. There could have been no Confederation in 1867 without the Intercolonial. On the other hand, its completion nine years later, ensuring for the first time easy and rapid communication between Halifax and Quebec, twelve months in the year, over an all-Canadian route, gave Confederation a new reality. The Intercolonial was not a financial success, and for many years it was the butt of political jokes. The rival Short Line through Maine which the C.P.R. later acquired stands for the profit motive and reflects the pressure of commercial competition; but the Intercolonial's value to Canada could not be measured in dollars. It was one of those great projects essential to an independent Canadian nationality which have been forced upon this country by the proximity of the United States, and which have been carried out by government because private enterprise could not or would not do the job that was required. The closest parallel is probably the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

## II

The development of the central section of the national system of communications — that in old Canada, from Quebec City to Lake Huron—presents a rather different picture. Here, after the early days, there was no belt of wilderness to be overcome. And the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes provided water transport all the way. But there were three obvious disadvantages to this natural artery which played, and still plays, such a vital part in the national economy. First, it was seriously interrupted by the St. Lawrence rapids and by Niagara Falls. Secondly, it could be used only in the summer months. Thirdly, it lay directly upon the border and was exposed to immediate severance by enemy action in time of war. Attempts to overcome these deficiencies constitute a great part of the nineteenth-century history of Canada.

One major sequence of these attempts centres in the canalization of the St. Lawrence, which is itself one of the great continuing themes of our history. This process was foreshadowed early in the eighteenth century, when the Sulpician Dollier de Casson tried to dig a canal at Lachine and nearly succeeded. It begins effectively during the War of the American Revolution, when the Royal Engineers constructed five small locks to facilitate the movement of men and supplies to the western posts.<sup>25</sup> The process has not ended yet.

The shortcomings of the existing St. Lawrence system, like those of the overland communication from Halifax, were painfully demonstrated during the War of 1812. The river rapids imposed tremendous

<sup>24</sup>On the Intercolonial, see O. D. Skelton, *The Railway Builders* (Toronto, 1916), 105-8, and G. P. de T. Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada* (Toronto, 1938), 203-15.

<sup>25</sup>M. J. Patton in *Canada and its Provinces*, X, 506-7; Burt, *The Old Province of Quebec*, 287-8; *The Canals of Canada under the Jurisdiction of the Department of Transport* (Ottawa, 1946).

expense and delay on the support of the forces defending Upper Canada. This burden was rendered heavier by the needs of the ever-growing navy on the Lakes. Because the Lakes formed the only good line of communication the British had, naval control of them was essential if Upper Canada was to remain British. Naval superiority enabled Brock to win his victories in the 1812 campaign; the loss of naval superiority on Lake Erie the next year automatically resulted in the loss of the western part of the province; naval superiority on Lake Ontario was so absolutely vital that the two sides engaged in a back-breaking shipbuilding race. In 1814 Commodore Sir James Yeo was flying his broad pendant in a three-decker more powerful than Nelson's flagship at Trafalgar, and the Americans were building two ships which would have been the largest in the world. The British were at a grave strategic disadvantage. Their fighting front and their one essential line of communication were actually one and the same. The most important section of the communication was the St. Lawrence, up which passed almost all the men and material that made the defence of Upper Canada possible. It was the Americans' failure to strike effectively at this British lifeline that led Commodore Yeo to remark after the war, rudely but accurately, that the saving of Canada had been due in part to "the perverse stupidity of the enemy".

Nevertheless, the enemy, being Anglo-Saxon, had been slowly learning. Had there been an 1815 campaign, he had intended to cut the St. Lawrence line. What is more, when the shooting was over one of his generals told this to Sir Frederick Robinson, then commanding in Upper Canada; and Robinson lost no time in telling the British government and urging it to carry out the plan, already discussed, for opening an alternative communication by the back country. The ultimate result was the construction between 1819 and 1832 of the Ottawa-Rideau canal system, which provided a military supply-line between Montreal and Kingston quite independent of the St. Lawrence. It was the most expensive military work ever carried out by the British government in North America.<sup>26</sup> It had to be built at the expense of the British taxpayer, because the Canadian authorities, who presumably had not read Adam Smith, considered that opulence was much more important than defence. (Defence, after all, was a matter for the mother country.) Those Canadians who were interested in canals were far more devoted to improving the great commercial route by the St. Lawrence; they did set about improving it in 1834, and after the Union the job was finished with the aid of an imperial loan.<sup>27</sup>

These various expensive canals were only a partial solution to the national problem, if only because they were useless for nearly half the year. The final answer lay with the railway builders. And in this central section of the country the problem was in the end comparatively easily solved. Across the fertile and populous lands of the Canadas railways sprouted in the fifties like asparagus in May. For once, commerce and security went hand in hand, and this part of the

<sup>26</sup>C. P. Stacey, "An American Plan for a Canadian Campaign" (*American Historical Review*, XLVI, January, 1941.)

<sup>27</sup>D. G. Creighton, *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence, 1760-1850* (Toronto, 1937), 271 ff., 342-4.

future nation's iron backbone was built with relatively little direct intervention by government, though not without a great deal of government assistance. By 1860, on the eve of the American Civil War, the Grand Trunk Railway was complete from Rivière du Loup to Sarnia.<sup>28</sup>

### III

The next section of the national highway was again a very different matter. When Canadians in the fifties began to look beyond the Lakes towards the North-West, they immediately became aware of the great barrier which is called today the Canadian Shield. This barrier's significance was thus described just at this time by Captain Palliser, who had been exploring in the West:

The manner in which natural obstacles have isolated the country from all other British possessions in the East is a matter of considerable weight; indeed, it is *the* obstacle of the country, and one, I fear, almost beyond the remedies of art. The egress and ingress to the [Red River] settlement from the east is obviously by the Red River Valley and through the States.<sup>29</sup>

It is true that in the summer months steamer travel was possible from the settled regions of Canada West to the head of Lake Superior; but even beyond this point there were still some 400 miles of the rugged Shield to traverse before reaching the prairies. Twice in recent years the British government had sent troops to Red River; and both times they had been moved by way of Hudson Bay. Sir George Simpson had expressed the view that the canoe route west from Lake Superior was impracticable for any large body of troops.

The Canadians refused to allow such pessimistic estimates to daunt them. In 1857 the provincial government sent an expedition to determine the best route for a communication between Lake Superior and Red River. Two years later the expedition's surveyor, Simon J. Dawson, made a report advocating a line beginning with a road running inland from Thunder Bay, continuing with a central section of water transport interrupted by numerous portages, and ending with another road from the Lake of the Woods to Fort Garry. This was the origin of the Dawson Route, which was to play an important part in Canada's acquisition of the west.

Work on opening this route began even before Confederation; the activity connected with the building of the western terminal road had something to do with bringing on the disturbances at Red River Settlement in 1869; and the following year the Dawson Route served for the movement of Colonel Wolseley's expedition. It is not always realized just how vital this expedition was to the future of the West. We know that the desire to acquire the Hudson's Bay territories for the United States was powerful in Minnesota and influential in Washington; we know that the existence of Riel's provisional government at

<sup>28</sup>See map in Skelton, *The Railway Builders*, p. 92.

<sup>29</sup>Parliamentary Papers, United Kingdom, 1860, cd. 2732, p. 5. References for the paragraphs that follow will be found in C. P. Stacey, "The Military Aspect of Canada's Winning of the West, 1870-1885" (*Canadian Historical Review*, March, 1940), of which they are largely a condensation.

Red River offered the Fenians their greatest opportunity, which fortunately they had not wit enough to seize; and we know that all the hostile elements south of the border counted upon the physical difficulties of access from Canada to prevent the Dominion from closing her hand upon the North-West. The *St. Paul Daily Press* placed the matter on a high level of piety:

. . . Whenever the people of the Northwest Territory, after having successfully vindicated their liberties and maintained their independence against Canada, shall declare themselves in favor of annexation to the United States, the United States, they may rest assured, will welcome them with open arms, and England will gladly avail herself of such a providential opportunity to settle the Alabama claims with the cession of a country whose destinies God has indissolubly wedded to ours by geographical affinities which no human power can sunder, as He has divorced it from Canada by physical barriers which no human power can overcome.<sup>30</sup>

Nothing was more important than that Canada should demonstrate her ability to move forces into the West by an all-Canadian route; and this was done in the summer of 1870. The most serious difficulty surmounted by the expedition was actually the temporary refusal of the United States authorities to allow its ships to pass through the American canal at Sault Ste. Marie, where no Canadian canal yet existed. The Dawson Route was still incomplete, and the troops had to follow the roundabout line by the Winnipeg River. But the forty-seven portages that had frightened Palliser and Simpson did not stop them. When the travel-stained soldiers gave their three cheers on Fort Garry's muddy square, the danger of the great West's being lost to Canada was almost at an end. Man, represented by Dawson, and Wolseley, and three battalions of British and Canadian riflemen, had joined together areas that had been put asunder by the God of St. Paul (Minnesota).

The whole of the Dawson Route was used in 1871 by the reinforcing expedition sent out after John O'Neill's abortive Fenian raid; it was used thereafter to relieve and maintain the military garrison of Fort Garry, and to move the first divisions of the Mounted Police into the west. It was improved with a view to making it a practicable immigrant route, which however it never became. It was virtually abandoned from 1876. In some respects it had disappointed its promoters, and an American wrote of it, "I have yet to see the person who has dared its discomforts a second time." Nevertheless, for a few years, at a very critical juncture in the history of Canada, it had been an absolutely essential part of the nation's outfit. Over it there passed into the West those elements of organized power, those few hundred armed and disciplined men, that meant security for the new territories. Without it the whole great region might well have passed from Canadian control.

However, the Dawson Route would never have been a really satisfactory answer to the problem of communication between Ontario and the West, even if its physical difficulties had been less formidable. For one thing, it was again purely a summer route. For another, it was far from fully independent of the United States. Connection with

<sup>30</sup>Dec. 23, 1869.

it could always be severed at the Sault canal; after the final settlement of the international boundary at the Lake of the Woods, Canadian boats had to pass through U. S. waters to reach their dock at the lake's northwest angle; and in the Rainy River section the Dawson Route lay actually on the border. A really independent route could be provided only by a railway; and it would have to be a line not merely connecting Winnipeg with the head of the lakes, but one extending to the settled areas of Ontario.

It will be remembered that John A. Macdonald's government fell in 1873 as the result of certain accompaniments of its western railway policy. Alexander Mackenzie's parsimonious administration which succeeded it never produced an effective western railway policy, but adopted the idea of building rail links that would alternate with sections of water transport. When Macdonald returned to power in 1878 he attacked the problem like the nation-builder he was. In 1880 the Canadian Pacific Railway contract was signed. In 1882 rail communication was completed between Fort William and Winnipeg, and the old Dawson Route was replaced by a line of steel. Soon work was in progress on the extraordinarily difficult section north of Lake Superior; for the government, though strongly pressed to utilize, at least temporarily, a line through the United States, insisted on an all-Canadian road.

As it turned out, the connection between the railway and the Dominion's control of the Northwest was demonstrated in the spring of 1885 in a fashion nobody had expected. When the news reached Ottawa that fighting had broken out between the Mounted Police and the supporters of Louis Riel, the North Shore line was still not completed; but even so it provided the means of concentrating the field force that put down the rising. Troops from the east were at Winnipeg a week after leaving their home stations, and the back of the movement was broken in little more than six weeks. Before the affair was quite over, the first through train reached Winnipeg, bringing artillerymen from Montreal. This little civil war of 1885 was in some of its aspects a sorry episode in our history; nevertheless, it wrote a very satisfactory conclusion to two sequences of national effort: one beginning when the Province of Canada sent its explorers to find a road to Red River in 1857, the other when Wolseley's men passed over that road in 1870 to ensure the new Dominion's possession of the new West. The union of east and west was fifteen years old in 1885; but that first through train steaming into Winnipeg made it a much more real thing than it had been before.

The rest of the story need not long detain us, for it is simply the story of the C.P.R. To it much that has been said of the Intercolonial applies equally well. That it too was a national political necessity is obvious. It was as vital a part of Confederation with British Columbia as the Intercolonial was of the original Confederation between Canada and the Maritimes. And though it was not built as a direct venture by government, and though it owed a great deal to the energy and sacrifices of a group of private capitalists, it also owed so much to government assistance that it cannot be called a mere private project. Here again we see the results of the special situation created by Canada's

proximity to the United States. It was the good fortune of the United States that the country's development could be carried through, in the main, by private enterprise; but if we in Canada had waited for the impulse of private profit to carry through the great national undertakings of the Macdonald period, we should have waited a very long time. Without government initiative there would have been no C.P.R. independent of the United States; certainly, there would have been no North Shore line to carry the regiments west in 1885. Happily, relations with the republic when the C.P.R. was being built were far friendlier than in the sixties when the plan was made for the Inter-colonial. This was reflected in the decision of 1881 to locate the line closer to the border than the original contract had provided. But Macdonald seems to have shown no disposition at any time to compromise on the question of an all-Canadian route.<sup>31</sup>

The triumph achieved over the tremendous barrier of the western mountains provides a splendid last act for the play. The actual final scene at Craigellachie, it is true, was deceptively workaday: Donald Smith tapping home the good iron spike, and Van Horne making his celebrated speech — fifteen words, seventeen syllables. Other countries, one feels, would have had not only a gold spike, but probably a band, and certainly a longer speech. But more words would scarcely have improved the occasion. For that day saw more than just the finishing of a railway. It witnessed the completion of the backbone of Canada. It was the realization of more than a century of imperial and national aspirations. Swift uninterrupted transport from one ocean to the other, unaffected by the seasons and wholly under Canadian control — that was the dream that had finally come true. There had been many obstacles on the road to Craigellachie, but they had all been overcome in the end. The 104th Regiment plodding through the Temiscouata snow in 1813, and Wolseley's men struggling over the portages of the Winnipeg in 1870, serve to typify the long sequence of endeavour that came to final victory in 1885.

Edmund Burke, in his most famous speech, spoke of ties which, though light as air, are strong as links of iron. The moral and sentimental bonds that Burke understood so well are the things that unite nations and empires, and in British history they have often confounded the "sophisters, economists and calculators" to whom he paid his respects in another celebrated passage. Nevertheless, in proper circumstances there is a great deal to be said for links of iron. It was faith and courage that created the Canadian nation; it was steel rails, stretching nearly 4,000 miles across a continent, that gave the nation bone and substance. Yet those rails themselves were only the product of human faith and courage, of long aspiration and patient perseverance. Sixty-eight years later, it is still good to look back to that day in Eagle Pass; for Donald Smith's sledgehammer there put the seal upon what may even today be called the greatest single achievement of Canadian nationality.

<sup>31</sup>On the C.P.R., Glazebrook, *History of Transportation*, Chap. VIII. There are various books on the picturesque aspects, including R. G. MacBeth, *The Romance of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (Toronto, 1924).