

“Cotton Debates.” But for all others, amnesia prevailed until the early 1960s when, perhaps prompted by the approaching centennial of Confederation, three men determined to rescue the parliamentary debates of our country’s first years from the margins of our political history.

In 1961, the noted University of Saskatchewan political scientist and leading historian of Parliament, Norman Ward, joined forces with House of Commons Speaker Roland Michener and Parliamentary Librarian Erik J. Spicer to initiate a project dedicated to reconstructing as accurate a rendition as possible of the missing early years of the Canadian parliamentary record out of the patchwork of the Scrapbook and Cotton Debates. Once funding was secured, the project was placed in the hands of Professor Peter B. Waite of Dalhousie University. Waite proved an apt appointee. He had already in 1962 published a lively account of the “life and times” of Confederation which drew heavily on contemporary newspaper reporting of the various colonial paths to or away from British North American union.¹⁶ His edited version of the debates of the central Canadian colonies in their combined Legislative Assembly in 1865 on the terms of Confederation had appeared in 1963. Under Waite’s inspired editorship there would be published successively over the ten years from 1967 to 1976 three volumes each of reconstituted Debates for the Senate and for the House of Commons, recording the parliamentary sessions of 1867-1868, 1869, and 1870 respectively in both English and French.

The Parliamentary Session of 1871

The fourth session of the Parliament first elected in August–September 1867 convened in Ottawa on 15 February 1871, and would sit until 14 April. These were typical parameters for an early Canadian Parliament. Politics was not a full-time vocation for most politicians; it was something to be fitted into an otherwise busy professional or commercial life. Distance and the relatively crude state of Canadian transportation also conspired against frequent sessions of Parliament, particularly for Nova Scotia and New Brunswick members. Parliament consequently met but once a year. Mid-winter to early spring offered the most convenient window for most – the rhythms of Canadian commerce and agriculture generally slowed in the winter. Once in session, the Commons established a steady but not onerous schedule. Daily sessions began at three in the afternoon and continued until the late afternoon. Sometimes, after a recess for dinner, the members sat into the evening. At times, a heated debate might push adjournment late into the evening and infrequently into the wee hours of the morning. In compensation for their labours, members received a sessional allowance of \$600 plus a stipend that covered their travel expenses. With a salary of \$5,000 a year, Cabinet ministers fared much better (largely because their obligation to the political affairs of the nation was considered a full-time commitment).

Attendance at the 1871 session reflected the original 181-member composition of the 1867 Commons; death, resignations and by-elections had altered the actual membership of the House. For these men, party politics existed in only a rudimentary manner. The election of 1867 had yielded John A. Macdonald a workable majority of 108 who loosely styled themselves as the Liberal-Conservative party, or the “government party.” This appellation reflected an attempt to preserve the expedient, pre-Confederation coalition of Ontario Conservatives, Quebec *bleus* and Ontario Reformers which had carried the union in Central Canada. The touch of party was light in the Maritimes with members styling themselves as “ministerialists,” prepared to support the

16. P.B. Waite. *The Life and Times of Confederation, 1864–1867: Politics, Newspapers and the Union of British North America*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962.