

The Railway Problem

Article V.—Record of Railway Corruption in Canada—The Grand Larcenies of the Grand Trunk

By E. B. Biggar

Has the tendency of private railway ownership to defeat the rule of the people been the same in Canada as in the United States and Great Britain? The Canadian railway corporations were the natural inheritors of the claims and purposes of the old Hudson's Bay Co., whose consistent policy was to monopolize not only the trade but the trade routes of the north-west. Modern history furnishes no instance where the power conferred on a small corporation over nearly half a continent was so imperial and unrestrained by any consideration save the will of the rulers. And when this power was at length challenged by the Canadian people, the evidence furnished to the British Parliament showed that there was no instance in either ancient or modern history—save perhaps the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt—where the moral condition of the subject people was made so completely subservient to the relentless pursuit of exorbitant gains. Out of this school of irresponsible corporation government there graduated many men who, after Hudson's Bay rule was broken, organized land companies and railway companies by which the traditions of the old company were maintained by modified methods.

The pioneers of settlement in Canada

of the province, and no doubt he would have succeeded had not the Grand Trunk risen to power with another set of politicians representing it in parliament in opposition to the Great Western.

In 1868 Sir John Rose, the finance minister, showed that the promoters of the G.W.R. had misappropriated \$1,225,000 of public funds to build a line in the United States (Detroit and Milwaukee) in violation of its charter, and that altogether four millions of its capital was thus illegally used. Now, the Commercial Bank, which had been organized by an allied group for use by the railway had advanced \$250,000 to the Detroit and Milwaukee company while it was nominally a separate company, but by the foreclosure of a mortgage the loan to the Michigan line was wiped out, with the result that the Commercial Bank collapsed, bringing a long remembered disaster. Altho millions of public money had been granted to this road it was wretchedly built, its operation being marked by a series of accidents.

The Great Western now sought power to lay a double track from Hamilton to London, but a member of the government privately told the applicant that power could not be given as the American contractor had too much influence in parliament. This contractor was



Big guns being hauled by tractors in the Jordan front. On every part of the line now heavy artillery of this kind is smashing a path in the German defenses through which the Allied Infantry may advance.

naturally adopted the methods of the old land and the United States when railway building began. The people needed more than wagon roads in opening up new lands for settlement and they did not realize the possibilities of public credit. Nor did their political leaders enlighten them. We may infer the reasons for this when we learn that the first railway in Upper Canada—the London and Gore—chartered in 1834, had as its promoters Allan McNab and a group of other prominent members of the legislature. McNab became leader of a party and was knighted. For some time he was actually chairman of the standing committee on railways, and in that capacity was able to advance the plans of the railway schemes in which he was privately interested. On this same committee was Francis (afterwards Sir Francis) Hawks; J. Cauchon, afterwards made a senator; Malcolm Cameron, a railway promoting lawyer who remained in parliament over 25 years; and James Morris, an active railway promoter who afterwards became postmaster general. The London and Gore became the nucleus of the Great Western Railway, afterwards merged into the Grand Trunk.

The Game Begins

Sir Allan MacNab was for years president of the Great Western and was able to use his government to obtain a loan of £770,000 for his road. It was while on the railway committee that he tried to get parliament to endow this road with a monopoly in railways in this part

then approached and asked his price. It was the contract for the double tracking. This scheme was dropped for the time but other privileges were sought, among which was the power to disregard that provision of the Railway Act which required trains to stop before crossing the bridge over the Desjardins Canal near Hamilton. In less than two years afterwards a train which did not stop plunged thru this bridge, and among the first recovered of the sixty victims of that memorable railway disaster was the dead body of the great contractor himself. The late Thos. C. Keefer, one of the civil engineers appointed to report on this accident, found that the bridge was not built of oak as provided for, but of pine, and badly put together at that.

So far from being an exception to the methods of promotion and quality of work, these cases may be taken as a type of railway building by private companies in the early days. It was a saying that the list of incorporators of some of these roads sounded almost like a roster of parliament. During the railway mania of 1855-60 American as well as British railway contractors and promoters came over to Canada to show how railways might be built, even without the money of promoters, by getting the municipalities to give bonuses, which, when added to the government aid, would make the construction profitable, whether the traffic afterwards paid or not.

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