

The Origin of the Canadian Pacific Railway:

A Political Retrospect

(By His Honour, Judge Howay, New Westminster, B. C.)

It is universally true that the dreamer precedes the actor. Who was the first to dream of a transcontinental railway through Canada? Stephenson's "Rocket" had proved itself in 1829; the Royal William, first of steam vessels, had crossed the Atlantic ocean, from the west, eastward—that is from Quebec to Liverpool in 1833. Canada, having thus applied steam to water transportation in terms of vast distances, was naturally and properly prompt to contemplate its application to similar distances in its own territory. The Northwest Passage would be found at last, the long-dreamed-of short route to the Orient, not in the tortuous ice-encumbered channels of the North, but across the broad prairies and through the narrow passes of the Rocky Mountains.

Mr. Amor De Cosmos (whose real name was Bill Smith) in speaking during the Confederation debate in the British Columbia Legislative Council in 1870 said: "I will take occasion to do justice to the memory of the gentleman who proposed the Overland Railway through British America. It was during the administration of Sir Robert Peel in 1844 or 1845 that A. W. Godfrey, a bookseller of Halifax, addressed letters to Sir Robert Peel about a railway from Halifax to Vancouver Island." How far this suggestion may have been a reaction from the stimulus of Sam Slick's suggestions in the "Clockmaker" I leave to others to determine. Certainly Nova Scotians were among the earliest to dwell upon the possibilities of the overland railway and its national importance. Joseph Howe, "the Tribune of Nova Scotia," in May, 1851, uttered this prophecy: "I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, yet I venture to predict that in five years we shall make the journey hence (i.e. from Halifax) to Quebec and Montreal and St. John by rail; and I believe that many in this room will live to hear the whistle of the steam engine in the passes of the Rocky Mountains and to make the journey from Halifax to the Pacific in five or six days." In the same year application for a charter to construct a transcontinental railway was made to the legislature of Canada. The promotion failed, not because the scheme was regarded as visionary, but because of the indefinite rights of the Hudson's Bay Company in the intervening territory.

The story of the various plans and suggestions that were made during the next twenty years is very interesting as all gropings are, but is of no real value in this sketch. People in Eastern Canada who dreamed of a vast British nation arising in northern North America, and people in England who thought deeply upon the defence of our far-flung empire, or upon the commercial chain that should bind its distant parts, or upon the questions of criminality and colonization — two things, strangely enough, quite closely associated in the public mind—all evolved schemes for its construction. It is so easy to do these things on paper and by one's own fireside. Paper is indeed, in combination with a pen, a great wizard; and the only time that many people have anything of the necromancer is when they are equipped with pen and paper.

But to the rank and file in Eastern Canada, to those ordinary persons who constitute the great bulk of the voters, the question was one that was looked upon with unconcern or at any rate with the same academic interest that we take in the canals of Mars. With a thinly-settled country even in those parts which had been the home of civilized man for generations it seemed to them the height of madness to talk seriously of a railway into vast, unpeopled areas of prairie, which they looked upon as a part of **the great American desert**; and when to that was added the suggestion of carrying it across the great backbone range of the continent, these sensible and sober-minded people were apt to discontinue the discussion, step aside, and look with suspicion upon the mentality of the person, and perhaps even to tap their foreheads and smile significantly.

In only one place in British North America was there a real live interest in the railway, an interest in which all shared; and that was in the far away colony of British Columbia. This colony had had a mining boom and had drawn to it many adventurers from all parts of the globe, but principally from the United States; to govern the land, to carry on the public service, to build roads, trails, and bridges, and to maintain a perfect army of civil servants had cost far more than any reasonable form of taxation would or could produce. Yearly deficits, declining business, decreasing popu-

lation, a depressed, if not a dispirited people, all combined to make talk of union with the new Dominion of Canada a common topic in every place where men forgathered. Such a union would probably effect two objects: (1) It would relieve the colony from its burden of debt, (2) it would afford some form of material connection with Canada. It is with this latter phase that we are now concerned. At first the public thought went not beyond a wagon road; only the most roseate dreams included a railway. Gradually the dream took on the form of something tangible. Hence the people of British Columbia in the tentative terms submitted to the Canadian Government in 1870 as a basis of union asked for a wagon road at once, and a railroad in the dim and distant future. When the proposition was placed before Sir John A. Macdonald and his associates they demurred to the double expense of a wagon road and railroad and came out boldly for a railway, to be begun within two years after union had been consummated, and completed within ten years, connecting tide water in British Columbia with the existing Canadian railways. It was indeed more than a bold move. Sir Richard Cartwright is right in saying: "One thing is certain, that never was a great project undertaken with less knowledge or consideration than the union with British Columbia and the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway." Sir Richard goes on to doubt "if there was a man on the Treasury Bench who so much as knew whether there was one range of mountains or three to be crossed before we could reach the Coast." Sir John Macdonald had, months before the delegation left the Pacific coast, in a letter dated January 28, 1870, written to a personal friend "Many thanks for your letter of 26th giving me an account of your conversation with ———. It is quite evident to me not only from this conversation, but from advices from Washington that the United States government are resolved to do all they can, short of war, to get possession of the Western territory, and we must take immediate and vigorous steps to counteract them. One of the first things to be done is to show unmistakeably our resolve to build the Pacific Railway."

Sir John rightly viewed the railway as a commercial and a political