Century Magazine, Oct. 1885

By G.M. Grant, of Queen's University, King

# THE CANADA PACIFIC RAILWAY.

WHAT tempted the people of Canada to undertake so gigantic a work as the Canada Pacific Railway? The difficulties in the way were great, unprecedented, unknown. Had they been known beforehand, the task would not have been attempted. We were under the inspiration of a national idea, and went forward. We were determined to be something more than a fortuitous collocation of provinces. That the difficulties were faced and overcome as they emerged, great temptations to halt or retreat being quietly set aside, proves that we, like our neighbors and progenitors, are not easily discouraged. Our ultimate destiny will be none the worse because we have — not unwillingly — made sacrifices in order to make ourselves a nation.

Roughly speaking, the new country through which the great railway runs consists of three sections,— about a thousand miles of forest from the upper Ottawa to the Red River of the North; then a thousand miles of alluvial; and then five or six hundred miles of mountains, from the first chain of the Rockies to where the waters of the Pacific are sheltered by the breakwater of Vancouver Island. The total length of the line from Montreal to the Pacific terminus is 2895 miles. The first section was long considered impracticable for a railway, and the expense of construction has been enormous. The rocks at the back of Lake Superior are the oldest known to men of science and the toughest known to engineers. But dynamite, if there be enough of it, can do anything. This part of the line was opened last spring most dramatically, it being used before actual completion to transport our militia to put down the half-breed and Indian rising in the North-west. No amount of champagne-drinking and of driving last spikes of gold could have called the attention of the country so emphatically to its importance. The second section runs through what promises to be the great granary of the world. The third is being pushed across a sea of mountains. Thousands of navvies of all nationalities are swarming in the valley of the Columbia, and thousands of Chinese are working on the grade easterly. When this section is completed, and the shortest of all transcontinental railways opened for traffic from ocean to ocean, Canada will have attained to unification, so far as links of steel can unify.

The work is so completely a political necessity that — along with the Intercolonial Railway, which binds the Atlantic provinces to old Canada — it may be called the symbol of our national existence. Whether it will pay the company financially or not is a question on which experts differ. That it will develop the country, and thus at any rate pay indirectly, seems to me unquestionable. The Intercolonial was run for a time at a cost to the Dominion of over half a million dollars annually. It now pays its way; and though shorter through lines are to be built, the increasing local traffic, the best indication of the real value of the road to the country, will keep it running. So, too, the first section of the Canada Pacific pierces a wilderness that wise men said would not furnish business to pay for greasing the wheels; but it gets freight enough in the shape of lumber alone to pay for the wheels as well as the grease. It is revolutionizing the mode of lumber transportation on the upper Ottawa and to the West. The lumber kings find that time is money. It is more profitable to send on logs to market by rail than to continue the tedious plan of floating them, from the banks of far-away lakes and nameless streams in the interior, down countless rapids and slides to unbroken waterways. The danger now is that our timber limits, which constitute an essential part of the national capital, may be exhausted within a measurable time. With regard to the rugged Laurentian regions to the north of Lake Superior, unexplored as yet by men of science, there are grounds for believing that they will turn out to be as rich in mineral wealth as the southern shores of the lake; and no business pays a railway so well as that which a mining community supplies. Then, the fertile plains of the North-west are certain to yield harvests that will tax to the utmost the carrying capacity of branch as well as trunk lines.

These plains extend for eight hundred miles west of Winnipeg. Originally a north-western instead of a western route from Winnipeg had been chosen for the railway, because every one said that the only "fertile belt" was in that direction. This "belt," or rainbow, of fertile land swept semicircularly round a supposed great wedge of the American desert. But the company came to the conclusion that the plains west of Winnipeg had been belied, and that the rainfall was sufficient for the growth of cereals or root crops. Singularly enough, their faith has been vindicated; it turns out that we have no desert. This fact is a physical reality of the greatest importance with regard to the area in the North-west available for

236518