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A Hundred Years of North America¹

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“ANYONE at all inquisitive about the distribution of human beings in North America cannot fail to have been struck by the basic American stock of the Maritime Provinces and Ontario in Canada, the millions of French Canadians in New England and New York, the traces of the Canadian in the American Middle West and of the American on the Canadian prairies, and the persistent to-and-fro movement of both stocks along the Pacific coast from Mexico to the Bering Strait. Here is a continent where international boundaries have been disregarded by restless humans for almost two centuries.”

This passage is taken from the foreword of a remarkable study entitled *The Mingling of the Canadian and American Peoples*, planned and for the most part written by the late Marcus Lee Hansen of the University of Illinois, completed by John Bartlet Brebner of Columbia University, and forming part of an ambitious series designed to illustrate the many-sided relations of Canada and the United States. The series is being prepared, under the direction of James T. Shotwell of Columbia University and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, by a group of scholarly men, some of whom are Canadians and the others, Americans. Among them are several, like Professor Shotwell and Professor Brebner, who were born in one

¹ An address presented before the fourteenth annual North Shore Historical Assembly, meeting at Fort William, Ontario, on August 1, 1942. One session of this joint meeting of the historical societies of St. Louis, Lake, and Cook counties, Minnesota, and of Thunder Bay, Ontario, commemorated the centennial of the Webster-Ashburton treaty. The speaker whose address is published herewith officially represented the Canadian government at the meeting. *Ed.*

country and are making their contribution to the life of the other.

The nature and purpose of the series and the relationship of the men who are preparing it to these two North American commonwealths are, it seems to me, profoundly significant. Where else the world over will you find two neighboring countries whose relations are so extraordinarily intimate that it should have been thought worth while to devote a score or more of substantial volumes to their examination?

But, while it is quite true that for the better part of two centuries the boundaries between what today are Canada and the United States have been disregarded by restless pioneers seeking homes for themselves and their families, the intimate relations that we recognize today have not always been intimate, have not always been even friendly or neighborly. Without going back more than a hundred years, one finds in the period since the signing of the Webster-Ashburton treaty a growth in neighborly relations between the peoples of these two countries that bears a good deal of resemblance to the growth of a tree.

As the years have gone by the history of the continent reveals variations in the annual growth of neighborliness. There have been setbacks. How could it be otherwise in a human world? We have known the drought of misunderstanding, the blight of national jealousies, the insect pest of ancient grievances. But, as the tree has become securely rooted in the North American soil and has sent stout trunk and branches up into the North American sky, it has been able to brush aside these enemies and afford the world an example of two neighboring nations united but free — one in their democratic way of life; one in their hatred of tyranny and their instinctive resistance to undue regulation; one in their contempt for sham and dishonesty in word or deed; one in their practical sympathy for suffering or distress; one in their insistence upon political, social, religious, and intellectual freedom; one in their enlightened ideas about education, sanitation, transportation, and even such minor matters as outdoor games; one in a good many of their likes and dislikes; one, perhaps above all, in that keen sense of humor that, fortunately, steps in from time to time

and prevents men and nations from making themselves ridiculous. And, at the same time, each is free to carry on its own ideas of government without even the shadow of interference by the other.

A glimpse of international relations along the American-Canadian boundary something more than a hundred years ago is to be found in a delightful little book of travel, *The Shoe and Canoe*, by Dr. John J. Bigsby, secretary to the British section of the boundary commission under articles 6 and 7 of the treaty of Ghent. Bigsby, writing of what is now Fort Frances on the Rainy River, says: "Walking out, the morning after our arrival, with Mr. W. M'Gillivray, the Lieut.-Governor, I saw on the opposite side of the river some buildings, and a tall, shabby-looking man, angling near the falls. I asked my companion what all this meant. He replied, "The two or three houses you see form a fur-trading post of John Jacob Astor, the great merchant of New York. The man is one of his agents. He is fishing for a dinner. If he catch nothing he will not dine. He and his party are contending with us for the Indian trade. We are starving them out, and have nearly succeeded.'"

A thousand miles or so to the east, at a time when memories of the War of 1812 still rankled in the minds of Americans and Canadians, the government of the United States spent a million dollars — a much larger sum then than now — on a massive stone fort. It stood near the northern end of Lake Champlain, and was known as Fort Montgomery. It was also, for sufficient reasons, called "Fort Blunder" by the people on both sides of the boundary. Here, very briefly, is the story. As long ago as 1772 or thereabouts two well-meaning and supposedly competent land surveyors, Thomas Valentine and John Collins, ran a line from the upper waters of the Connecticut to the upper St. Lawrence, touching briefly en route at almost the extreme northern point of Lake Champlain. The line they were supposed to be running was the forty-fifth degree of north latitude, and everyone might have been happy had not two professional busybodies named J. C. Tiarks and Ferdinand Hassler, many years afterward, resurveyed the line and found that the Valentine and Collins line was far from accurate, that in fact it wavered rather disreputably about the forty-fifth parallel and

left an ominous gap of three-quarters of a mile at Lake Champlain. In that gap stood the all-too-solid mass of Fort Montgomery, unmistakably on Canadian soil. After years of negotiation, those astute statesmen Daniel Webster and Lord Ashburton solved the problem. They decided that, as something must be moved, and it was not practicable to move Fort Montgomery, the only thing to do was to move the boundary. So it was solemnly decreed that the inaccurate Valentine and Collins line should remain the boundary — to the great distress of all conscientious land surveyors, to whose profession it is a perpetual reproach.

Fort Montgomery offers one of many illustrations of the change in relations between the United States and Canada that time has brought about. Built, it would seem, ostensibly to protect peace-loving Americans from turbulent Canadian desperadoes, it became as the years went by more and more of an absurd anachronism, and also more and more of a financial white elephant. The authorities found it embarrassing to have to justify appropriations for the maintenance of a huge fortification that was supposed to protect a region where Canadians and Americans moved back and forth across a boundary line they had almost forgotten; where Canadians were living on the United States side and Americans on the Canadian side; where they intermarried, went to the same church, belonged to the same lodge, and did everything in fact but vote for the same political candidate. Finally, after poor old "Fort Blunder" had been used for various casual purposes shockingly out of keeping with its original calling, it was sold to the contractor who built the causeway and bridge across Lake Champlain. And so, when the time returns that one can again drive as far as from Port Arthur to Lake Champlain, some of you may go there and thus have the opportunity to reflect that you are probably driving over the grave of a portion of Fort Montgomery.

Echoes of the War of 1812 that were responsible for the making of such blunders as the building of Fort Montgomery took some years to finally sink into silence. An odd memory of my remote childhood is a game of hide-and-seek called "Yankee Lie Low." It was very popular in my part of Ontario, but the name had long lost any significance.

It was not, in fact, until many years later that it suddenly occurred to me that this game of ours was a belated echo of the old war. Once, perhaps, a fierce battle cry for men, it had been transformed, happily, into an amusing game for children.

Some years ago the members of an international tribunal were received by an eminent American statesman in Washington. Something had been said about the old controversy over the Maine-New Brunswick boundary. The statesman smiled. "I wonder," he said, "if you have heard the story of how Campobello became Canadian. It appears — and far be it from me to vouch for the correctness of the yarn — that Lord Ashburton and Mr. Webster were coming down the St. Croix in a British gunboat. They dined together on the boat. Mr. Webster, as you may have heard, enjoyed his glass of wine. Lord Ashburton was most hospitable. Finally they went on deck. Lord Ashburton — so the scandalous tale goes — had arranged with the captain of the gunboat to sail around a side of the island that could be navigated only at high tide. He now turned to Mr. Webster. 'How does this appeal to you, Mr. Webster, for the boundary line?' Mr. Webster by this time was seeing three or more Campobellos, and assured Lord Ashburton that it was quite all right with him."

The incident on Rainy River described by Dr. Bigsby — and there are of course many like it that could be told if one had time — suggests the tenseness of the attitude of Canadians and Americans to one another a century ago, and the fact that the boundary, however imaginary it might be, was then a very real boundary. How amazingly different that attitude is today!

A few days ago the members and staff of the International Joint Commission traveled over a number of the boundary lakes between Lake Superior and the Lake of the Woods looking into certain matters that come within their jurisdiction. The commission has been carrying out similar inspection trips at various points on the long boundary between Canada and the United States, or holding public hearings in cases involving sometimes Canadian, sometimes American, interests, for thirty years. The history of the commission is in a very real sense the history of Canadian-American relations as they are

today. It consists of three members appointed by the President and three appointed by the King on the recommendation of the Canadian government. These six North Americans hear cases and then sit down together around a table to decide what is to be done about them. In thirty years they have never failed to reach a conclusion reasonably satisfactory to the people directly interested on either side of the boundary, and in nearly every case the decision has been unanimous.

I happen to have been the Canadian secretary of the commission since its establishment, and I have known all its members and have been present at all its hearings and executive meetings. I could not imagine any group of six Canadians or six Americans, acting as a national tribunal of any kind, giving more wholehearted, impartial service to their own people than the members of the International Joint Commission have given to the people of both countries.

Probably the most severe test to which we have been put, as a group of Americans and Canadians pledged to work together for the welfare of North America, came as long ago as 1915. We were then in the middle of the Lake of the Woods investigation, and had just completed a public hearing at International Falls. After a rather sketchy luncheon, we started down Rainy River in a motorboat. There were, if I remember aright, some twenty of us in the boat — commissioners, secretaries, lawyers, engineers, and reporters — and we were on our way to Warroad on the Lake of the Woods, where the next hearing was to be held.

We went by boat instead of by train so that the commission might have an opportunity to study physical conditions on the river. It was an unfortunate decision, as we managed to wreck the boat in the Manitou Rapids. After we had waded ashore, we found ourselves on a desolate clay bank, many miles from the nearest town. At that time there was not even a farm within reach. The only thing to do was to wait patiently until some sort of craft appeared on the river by which we could send for assistance. Unfortunately it was midnight before, by means of a bonfire, we managed to attract the attention of some Indians. Up to that time a census of available supplies had produced only half a cake of milk chocolate and half a flask of Bourbon whisky.

And what was that among so many! The Indians, however, supplied half a dozen smallish sturgeon, which we broiled on twigs over the bonfire and divided among the party. No fish of any kind was ever so thoroughly appreciated. We ate them with our fingers and without salt, and licked our fingers thereafter. Meanwhile one of the engineers had been sent off with the Indians to Emo, the nearest town. Through a variety of misadventures, relief boats could not be procured for several hours, and it was nearly four o'clock in the morning before we reached Emo. For something like twelve hours a score of men, roughly half of them American and half Canadian, had been shipwrecked on an inhospitable shore, under very uncomfortable conditions. The majority were well on in years, and all were subject to the human reaction to lack of food and drink and tobacco and anything even approximately soft to lean tired bodies against. Yet they managed to get through the long night without quarreling, thanks, perhaps, to that sense of humor which, as I have said, is one of the joint possessions of Americans and Canadians. It may be worth remembering that the owner of the flask of Bourbon was Jim Tawney of Winona, chairman of the United States section of the commission, and that he divided its contents with strict impartiality.

As a memorial of the occasion the Canadian secretary compiled a burlesque account of an imaginary investigation into the circumstances surrounding the wreck, and the United States chairman had it privately printed at Winona. It is now, I imagine, among the comparative rarities of Minnesotaiana.

The International Joint Commission—to return to more serious matters—has always made it a point to go to the people, instead of making them come to it. Hearings are held at some point that is most convenient to those mainly concerned. No man, however humble, is denied the opportunity of being heard before the commission and having his day in court, and the policy has always been to get at the essential facts without being hampered too much by strictly legal procedure. The commission has never hesitated to waive its own rules of procedure when that seemed desirable in the circumstances of a particular case.

I make no excuse for taking up so much of your time with this account of the International Joint Commission, because, it seems to me, no other Canadian or American, or jointly Canadian and American, organization or institution illustrates so strikingly the intimacy of the relations that have grown up between these two neighboring countries and their people.

Last year the commission held a public hearing in Hibbing, in the very heart of the Mesabi Range. While I looked into the vast hole in the ground out of which such incredible quantities of ore have been taken to feed the furnaces of Pittsburgh, and thought of the enormous contribution that this part of Minnesota has made to the wealth and industrial progress of the United States, I was reminded of a letter written by Lord Ashburton to Daniel Webster at the time the treaty of 1842 was being negotiated.

You will, of course, recall that there had been a good deal of discussion as to the line the boundary should follow from Lake Superior to the Lake of the Woods. The British commissioner under the treaty of Ghent had contended for a line from Fond du Lac, or, approximately, Duluth, as it would be today, by way of the St. Louis and Vermilion rivers to Rainy Lake. The American commissioner had asked for a line from the mouth of the Kaministikwia, or more or less where we are now, up that stream to Dog Lake and Sturgeon Lake, and by a variety of small waterways to Rainy Lake. Neither side would give way, apparently not so much because a compromise of their differences was impracticable as because the problem of routes was tangled up with the entirely different and, as we see it now, relatively insignificant question of which country should get St. George's (now Sugar) Island, in the waterway between Lake Huron and Lake Superior.

Now listen to Lord Ashburton: "The first point [*St. George's Island*] I am ready to give up to you, and you are no doubt aware that it is the only object of any real value in this controversy. The island of St. George is reported to contain 25,920 acres of very fertile land; but, the other things connected with these boundaries being satisfactorily arranged, a line shall be drawn so as to throw this island within the limits of the United States.

"In considering the second point, it really appears of little importance to either party how the line be determined through the wild country between Lake Superior and the Lake of the Woods; but it is important that some line should be fixed and known."

Oddly enough, while Canadian writers who are unfamiliar with all the facts have repeatedly abused Lord Ashburton for his settlement of the northeastern boundary and his supposed surrender of many square miles of what was thought to be Canadian soil, no one, so far as I can remember, has drawn attention to the very casual way in which he tossed aside an area that has already produced two thousand million tons of iron ore. Imperial wars have been fought for much less than this, while the area that was added to Maine by the Webster-Ashburton treaty was actually considerably smaller than that awarded to the United States by the king of the Netherlands in an earlier arbitration and turned down by the United States Senate.

So far as the boundary west of Lake Superior was concerned, Webster and Ashburton finally compromised on the old canoe route of the fur traders by way of the Grand Portage — or, more precisely, on the Pigeon River and the trader's route beyond the Grand Portage — reserving to the British the right to use the portage. That right, I suppose, may be set off against the loss of the iron ranges. Be that as it may, one notes here the Anglo-Saxon talent for compromise, afterward to be applied to the boundary beyond the Rockies.

I seem to have been drifting away from the thought I had in mind when I began this address, that is, the growth of good-neighborliness between Canadians and Americans. The point we have already reached, where there is the closest harmony of common interests, with at the same time complete independence of government, seems to me to offer an ideal example not only to other neighboring nations but to all nations. There is a passion today among many people — a natural reaction from the barbarous inhumanity of the present war — for a structural union of nations, with a single parliament, a single code of laws, and so forth. The same idea has been advocated, and to a limited extent tried out in Canada and elsewhere, in the field of religion. It is highly improbable that the great body of Christians throughout the world will ever consent to unite in a single church.

Agreement is easy on certain fundamental doctrines, but when it comes to the form in which worship shall be expressed, people must inevitably differ. You, perhaps, find satisfaction in one form of service; I, in another. You may find discomfort or annoyance in mine; and I in yours. And that is so in spite of the fact that there is much more tolerance now of the religious manners and customs of one's neighbors than there was a century ago.

And what is true of the average man's religious life is equally true of his political life. If he is any good, he will put love of his own country second only to love of his own kindred. Men have cheerfully given their lives for their native land; but one cannot easily imagine men sacrificing themselves for, let us say, a league of nations.

Some sort of union or confederacy of the democratic countries must come out of this war, but if it is to live and be worth while it must be flexible, not rigid, providing the most complete international co-operation consistent with national freedom. One hopes for a group of independent nations working together in as perfect harmony as human frailty will permit, not merely to make the world safe for democracy, but to build up a democracy worth saving.



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