



AN ACT
OF THE IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT
FOR THE
UNION
OF
CANADA, NOVA SCOTIA AND
NEW BRUNSWICK,
AND THE
GOVERNMENT THEREOF;
AND FOR PURPOSES CONNECTED THEREWITH.

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THOMAS D'ARCY MCGEE

The Idealist

— — — — —
by Alastair C.F. Gillespie
With a Foreword by the Hon. Bob Rae

MLI PRESENTS THE
CONFEDERATION
SERIES

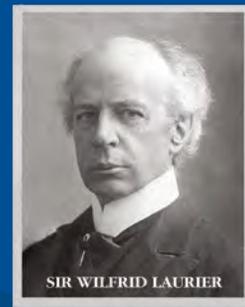




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Table of Contents

Foreword.....	2
Avant-propos	3
Introduction.....	6
A “New Northern Nationality”	7
Confronting Sectarian Conflict	10
Into Politics: The Struggle to Unite Reform.....	11
Answering His Critics.....	13
Uniting Reformers of Upper and Lower Canada	15
Federation the Way Forward	18
Reform Alliance: Strained to Breaking Point	20
Crossing the Floor.....	24
A Constant Canada, a New National Identity.....	26
The Confederation Debates: “We Dreamed a Dream of Union”	31
Ideals, Realities, and the Invention of Canada	36
About the Author.....	37
References	38
Endnotes	39

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Foreword

Thomas D’Arcy McGee can rightly be called the “poet of Confederation.” His life, cut short by an assassin’s bullet, was full of change and chaos, but as a member of both the Legislative Assembly and the House of Commons his eloquence captured the best of the spirit of the times.

Canadians know McGee for his pleas for moderation and pluralism, but his life was full of twists and turns. As a young Irishman he was a fierce critic of discrimination against the majority Catholic population in his native land. His political attacks on British rule eventually led to warrants for his arrest – he was forced to leave Ireland permanently in 1848, and took up residence in New York. As a journalist there in the 1850’s he took on the “Know Nothing” anti-Catholic movement that followed the arrival of thousands of immigrants to the United States, and he became more conservative in his religious views. This brought him into yet another conflict, with political Fenianism, of which he eventually became a fierce critic.

When he was recruited to become a voice for the burgeoning Catholic population in Montreal, he realised that he had found his home. The Quebec Act of 1774 had allowed the Catholic population of Quebec to practice their religion, and given French Canadians recognition of their language and legal system. The Irish who arrived in the tens of thousands during the Famine Years faced disease, poverty, and great hardship. Many died on the voyage, and gravesites in Montreal and Toronto were filled with the bodies of those who succumbed upon arrival. But their political presence was quickly felt.

McGee felt instantly at home upon his arrival, and was soon elected to the Legislative Assembly of the United Canadas. He quickly found his voice as a spokesman not just for the Irish community, but for a vision of Canada that embraced difference and a celebration of the diversity of his time.

His experience with the worst of American populism made him fearful of its expansion north. He changed his mind about Britain – he now saw the Empire, if done right, as a better assurance of pluralism than populist democracy. And he loved, above all, the “newness” of Canada, the sense that this was a place where even newcomers could quickly make their mark. And above all, he became a fierce defender of pluralism and moderation:

“The two greatest things that all men aim at in any free government are liberty and permanency. We have had liberty enough – too much perhaps in some respects – but at all events, liberty to our hearts content.”

He loved a country where “we have none of these old popular legends and stories which, in other countries, have exercised a powerful share in the government; here every man is the son of his own works.”

And he called on Canadians to wake up to the risk of American expansionism – “If we are true to Canada, if we do not desire to become part and parcel of these people, we cannot overlook this the greatest revolution of our times. Let us remember this, that when the three cries among our next neighbours are money, taxation, blood, it is time for us to provide for our own security... But if we are to have a universal democracy on this continent, the lower provinces – the smaller fragments – will be “gobbled up” first, and we will come in afterwards by the way of dessert.”

He summed up the arguments for Confederation in this way – “first, that we are in the rapids and must go on; next that our neighbours will not, on their side, let us rest supinely, even if we could do so from other causes; and thirdly, that by making the united colonies more valuable as an ally to Great Britain, we shall strengthen rather than weaken the imperial connection.”

So it was that he reminded his fellow Canadians, “Miracles would cease to be miracles if they were events of everyday occurrence; the very nature of wonders requires that they should be rare; and this is a miraculous and wonderful circumstance, that men at the head of the governments in five separate provinces, and men at the head of the parties opposing them, all agreed at the same time to sink party differences for the good of all, and did not shrink, at the risk of having their motives misunderstood, from associating together for the purpose of bringing about this result.”

McGee’s eloquence moved his fellow Canadians to tears, laughter, and cheers. He was a short man, but had a powerful voice, and he quickly gained friends with his winning ways. His friends from the Irish nationalist movement never forgave him for this embrace of Burkean constitutionalism. He, in turn, was not afraid to take them on, and it was for this courage that he ultimately paid with his life. He was assassinated in 1868, and a well known Fenian Patrick Whelan was found guilty in a trial undoubtedly affected by the strong emotions of the time. There was circumstantial evidence linking Whelan to the gun that killed McGee, but controversy still surrounds his conviction. Montreal’s population was 105,000 at the time – 80,000 of them turned out for McGee’s state funeral.

A poet, speechmaker, and fierce devotee of his new found country, McGee is rightly celebrated as the man who, above all his contemporaries, expressed the feelings and emotions that lay behind the Confederation project.

He also left us with what is called “the curse of Thomas D’Arcy McGee”. In defending the Quebec Resolutions to the Legislative Assembly he famously said “question it you may, reject it you may, or accept it you may, but alter it you may not.” The British North America Act remained an act of the British parliament until 1982, and since that time the amendment of the constitution has proven difficult, to say the least. ♦

The Hon. Bob Rae was 21st Premier of Ontario, and Interim Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada. He is now a partner with Olthuis Kleer Townshend LLP and teaches at the University of Toronto.

Avant-propos

Thomas D’Arcy McGee peut à juste titre être appelé le « poète de la Confédération ». Sa vie tragiquement écourtée sous les balles d’un assassin a été marquée par le changement et la confusion, mais l’éloquence de cet homme politique, tant à l’Assemblée législative qu’à la Chambre des communes, a capturé le meilleur de l’esprit du temps.

McGee est connu des Canadiens pour ses plaidoyers en faveur de la modération et du pluralisme, mais sa vie a été pour le moins mouvementée. Jeune homme, il s’est passionnément opposé à la discrimination contre la majorité catholique dans son pays natal, l’Irlande. Ses attaques politiques à l’endroit du régime britannique devaient finalement mener à des mandats d’arrêt lancés contre lui – il est forcé de quitter définitivement l’Irlande en 1848 pour se réfugier à New York. Puis, dans les années 1850, en tant que journaliste, il désavoue le mouvement anti-catholique « Know Nothing », qui est en forte ascension à la suite de l’arrivée de milliers d’immigrants aux États-Unis. Il adopte parallèlement des convictions religieuses plus conservatrices et cela le rapproche, cette fois, d’un autre conflit, le fénianisme, dont il devient avec le temps un critique féroce.

Lorsqu'il est choisi pour devenir la voix de la population irlandaise émergente à Montréal, il réalise qu'il a enfin trouvé son chez-soi. L'Acte de Québec de 1774 avait permis à la population catholique du Québec de pratiquer sa religion et avait assuré aux Canadiens français la reconnaissance de leur langue et de leur système juridique. Les Irlandais sont arrivés par dizaines de milliers au cours des années de famine, confrontés à la pauvreté, à la maladie et à d'effroyables difficultés. Beaucoup sont morts au cours du voyage et combien d'autres ont succombé à leur arrivée : les cimetières de Montréal et de Toronto étaient pleins. Mais la présence politique de cette population s'est rapidement fait sentir.

McGee se sent immédiatement à l'aise et est rapidement élu à l'Assemblée législative du Canada-Uni. Il devient non seulement le porte-parole de la communauté irlandaise, mais aussi le porte-étendard pour une vision du Canada qui souscrit à la conception de la diversité de l'époque et célèbre les différences.

Ayant côtoyé le pire populisme américain qui soit, il craint qu'il ne s'étende vers le nord. Sa perception de la Grande-Bretagne bascule – il est persuadé que l'Empire, bien dirigé, offre une meilleure garantie de pluralisme qu'une démocratie populiste. Aussi, il aime par-dessus tout le caractère de « nouveauté » que présente le Canada. Il a le sentiment qu'il s'agit d'un endroit où même les nouveaux arrivants peuvent rapidement faire leur marque. Et surtout, il est devenu un virulent défenseur du pluralisme et des forces modératrices :

« Les deux éléments principaux que tout le monde cherche à obtenir dans un gouvernement libéral sont la liberté et la permanence. Jusqu'à présent, nous avons eu assez de liberté, trop peut-être, à certains égards; mais enfin, nous en avons eu tout notre saoul.

« Nous n'avons ici aucun de ces récits ou de ces légendes populaires qui, dans d'autres pays, ont eu une grande influence sur le gouvernement; ici enfin chaque homme est le fils de ses œuvres, déclare-t-il, à propos de ce pays qu'il aime. »

Aussi, il presse les Canadiens de se méfier de l'expansionnisme américain en soulignant que si « nous sommes fidèles au Canada, si nous ne désirons pas être absorbés par nos voisins, nous ne pouvons pas rester calmes devant la révolution qui gronde à nos portes! Rappelons-nous qu'il est temps de songer à notre sécurité, quand de l'autre côté des frontières on entend ces trois cris : *Impôt! Or! Sang!* Cependant, si la démocratie devait s'établir et régner en maître sur notre continent, les provinces d'en bas, ces fragments de territoire, seraient les premières à être englouties, et le Canada suivrait au dessert ».

Il avance les motifs suivants en faveur de la Confédération : « d'abord, parce que nous descendons déjà les rapides et que nous n'avons pas le choix; ensuite, parce que nos voisins, de leur côté, ne nous laisseront pas nous reposer sur nos lauriers, même si nous pouvons faire cela pour d'autres motifs; et enfin parce qu'en faisant des colonies unies un allié plus solide pour la Grande-Bretagne, nous renforcerons le lien avec l'Empire plutôt que de l'affaiblir. »

C'est ainsi qu'il a rappelé à ses compatriotes que « les miracles cesseraient d'être des miracles s'ils se produisaient tous les jours. De par leur nature même, les événements merveilleux, miraculeux, sont rares et c'est vraiment quelque chose de miraculeux que de voir les chefs de gouvernement dans cinq colonies distinctes, de même que les leaders de l'opposition, s'entendre simultanément, laissant de côté leurs différences partisans au nom du bien commun, et ne craignant pas que l'on se méprenne sur leurs intentions, s'associer dans le ferme dessein d'en arriver au résultat que nous avons devant nous ».

Grâce à son admirable éloquence, McGee transportait ses concitoyens d'émotion – on ne voyait que larmes, rires et acclamations. McGee était de courte taille, mais sa voix était puissante. Ses positions gagnantes lui ont permis de s'attirer rapidement beaucoup d'amitiés. Ses amis du mouve-

ment nationaliste irlandais ne lui ont cependant jamais pardonné son adhésion à un constitutionnalisme burkéen. Il ne craignait pas, à son tour, de s'opposer à leurs idées, et a payé son courage de sa vie. Il a été assassiné en 1868, et le Fénian bien connu Patrick Whelan a été reconnu coupable au cours d'un procès qui, hors de tout doute, a été fortement imprégné des fortes émotions de l'époque. Les preuves reliant Whelan à l'arme qui avait tué McGee étaient circonstancielles, et la question soulève encore un doute raisonnable. Les funérailles nationales auxquelles McGee a eu droit ont attiré une foule impressionnante de 80 000 personnes, alors que Montréal comptait 105 000 habitants à l'époque.

Poète, orateur, féroce amoureux de son nouveau pays, McGee est célébré à juste titre comme l'homme qui, plus que tout autre de ses contemporains, a bien représenté les sentiments et les émotions qui sont à l'origine du projet de Confédération.

Il semble que le personnage ait aussi jeté sur nous un mauvais sort, ce qu'on appelle en anglais « Curse of Thomas D'Arcy McGee ». Défendant à l'Assemblée législative le résultat des travaux qui ont débouché sur les *Résolutions de Québec*, il a prononcé cette phrase célèbre : « vous pouvez l'examiner, le rejeter ou l'accepter, mais vous ne pouvez pas le modifier. [...] modifier le traité, c'est l'annuler, le détruire et rien d'autre ». L'Acte de l'Amérique du Nord britannique est demeuré une loi du Parlement britannique jusqu'en 1982, et depuis ce temps, amender la Constitution – et c'est un euphémisme – s'est révélé difficile. ♦

L'hon. Bob Rae a été le 21e Premier ministre de l'Ontario et chef par intérim du Parti libéral du Canada. Il est maintenant associé principal chez Olthuis Kleer Townsbend LLP et enseigne à l'Université de Toronto.

Introduction



“You have sent your young men to guard your frontier. You want a principle to guard your young men, and thus truly defend your frontier. For what do good men (who make the best soldiers) fight? For a line of scripture or chalk line—for a pretext or for a principle? What is a better boundary between nations than a parallel of latitude, or even a natural obstacle?—what really keeps nations intact and apart?—a principle. When I can bear our young men say as proudly, “our Federation” or “our Country,” or “our Kingdom,” as the young men of other countries do, speaking of their own, then I shall have less apprehension for the result of whatever trials the future may have in store for us.”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee, February 9, 1865

Thomas D’Arcy McGee arrived in Canada from New York in 1857, asked by members of the Irish community of Montreal to edit a newspaper. He soon became one of Confederation’s most gifted advocates, using his broadsheet to call on Canadians to found a new nation. Six months later, the former Irish rebel was a member of Parliament, and beginning 10 years’ advocacy of our new national ideal – claiming Canadians could form a new nationality, regardless of national origin, language or religion. As the definitive biography by David Wilson explains, McGee’s career was also consistently marked with controversy, his national ideal living alongside the divisive realities of politics (Wilson 2008 and 2011). Beginning his political career in a conflicted alliance with George Brown and the Protestant forces of Upper Canada Reform, McGee’s Reform alliance laid bare the serious Catholic-Protestant religious prejudice of Confederation-era Canada, and his effort to moderate his party from within ultimately failed. If McGee’s national ideal was tarnished by realities of Canadian politics, that roughshod edge between ideal and reality is a proper focus of Canadian interest at the 150th anniversary of Confederation.

McGee made the overcoming of ethnic, religious and national divides the overarching theme of his political career, and his story speaks to persistent Canadian realities of the opportunities and difficulties of accommodating diversity. He was a unionist and a federalist, supporting both one country and its division into parts. He called for a genuinely Canadian national identity, speaking out against hyphenated Canadianism, yet organized the Irish as a force in politics. He was a devoted promoter of immigration, tracing both the duties of Canada to welcome, and the duties of newcomers to give their first loyalty to Canada. He condemned bigotry and religious extremism, yet did so in terms that sometimes inflamed the controversies he condemned. After struggling to make the alliance with George Brown work, he crossed the floor to the Liberal-Conservatives, who delivered the school bill extending the rights of the Catholic minority he had failed to secure from George Brown, and McGee’s ultimate goal of Confederation. McGee’s new national ideal still has power to inspire. But only the conflict between ideal and reality has the more important power to teach. ◆◆◆

A “New Northern Nationality”

McGee’s *New Era* newspaper traced the outlines of his imagined new Canada, a federal union of British North America. Leaving New York, in his final editorial in *The American Celt*, he expressed disillusionment with the down-trodden social status of the Irish in America and his hope for a fairer field in Canada. His new newspaper in Montreal would be strictly secular, yet under McGee’s editorship the paper did profess a sort of faith – the conviction that Canadians had the chance to found a new nation, a “new northern nationality.” In the *New Era*’s first editorial, McGee argued simple justice could unite disparate peoples: “Justice between class and class, and Province and Province, between creed and creed, between man and man, this must constitute the glory, the safety, and the strength, of this new country” (Montreal *New Era*, May 25, 1857). This theme established, over the next year or so, McGee set forth the arguments underpinning the watchword that was to become his own – the New Nationality.

“These are facts, not dreams. Consult the map. There they stare you in the face, demanding the helping hand of wise and intrepid statesmen.”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

The common interests of British North America

McGee ran an editorial calling for a union of the provinces on August 4, 1857, surveying the common interests of British North America. Trade, public works, fisheries, railways, and the river St. Lawrence: the list was practical, but leavened with the hope that a wider stage would relieve the partisan acrimony of Canadian politics. “Great common interests would beget a love of the common weal; in the largeness of the receiver the little tributaries of faction would be lost” (Montreal *New Era*, August 4, 1857). Days later, another editorial argued federation was the natural result of politics in North America, and that the same “generative principle” which had led to the United States was at work in Canada. McGee dismissed the charge that his plan was premature. “These are facts, not dreams. Consult the map. There they stare you in the face, demanding the helping hand of wise and intrepid statesmen. If those mines of *maybe* are not marked out to the very depths, ‘then ‘tis not in our stars, but in ourselves’ the fault and drawback will be found. The verdict of posterity will be that we were unworthy of our time and its golden opportunities, for that we might have founded a new Empire, whereas we only begot three or four foolish and ephemeral factions.”

Elements of national belonging

McGee’s editorials acknowledged the need to fully recognize French-Canadian aspirations within the new Canadian nationality. To McGee, French-Canadians deserved recognition as the first explorers of the St. Lawrence valley. He denounced what he saw as an assimilationist outlook in Upper Canada, which refused to accept French-Canadians as the “nucleus” of a new Canadian nationality. “The Frenchman, in his humble British judgment, is only good to be absorbed, from all which is plain, that there is a growing aggressive intolerance of race, as well as of religion, in the minds of the majority

of men in Upper Canada.” The *New Era* argued that the Irish should unite with French-Canadians to resist these designs (Montreal *New Era*, January 7, 1858).

Another attractive feature of McGee’s New Nationality was his promotion of Canadian arts and literature as a source of national belonging. In an article headlined *A National Literature for Canada*, McGee declared: “Literature is the vital atmosphere of nationality. Without that all-pervading, indefinite, exquisite element, national life – public life – must perish and rot. No literature, no national life – this is an irreversible law” (Montreal *New Era*, June 17, 1857). Canadian writing should borrow freely, but not slavishly, remaining steadfastly Canadian: “Come! Let us construct a national literature for Canada, neither British nor French, nor Yankeeish, but the offspring and heir of the soil, borrowing lessons from all lands, but asserting its own title throughout all” (ibid.). He called for the protection of Canadian culture from American competition, saying Canadians must build a “Grand Trunk of thought” to equal the great railroad as an instrument of national unity. “There is an intellectual and political bush,” he wrote, “as sorely in need of pioneer thinkers and advocates, as the backwoods are in need of glittering axes and vigorous hands, skilled in the wild woodcraft of the new world” (Montreal *New Era*, January 23, 1858).

“There is an intellectual and political bush, as sorely in need of pioneer thinkers and advocates, as the backwoods are in need of glittering axes and vigorous hands, skilled in the wild woodcraft of the new world.”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

Irish-Canadian mobilization

McGee also called for Irish-Canadians to organize politically and flex their muscles in politics. In an editorial headlined *The Balance of Provincial Power*, McGee criticized a system that produced a cabinet that excluded the Irish, Catholic and Protestant alike. Canadian government, wrote McGee, was a “compromise of nationalities,” and it fell to each group to secure its own position. “In the balance of power the Irish weight must be felt. . . . We insist on our right to a proportionate representation in every department of administration, from the Cabinet to the constabulary. We ask no more than our just share, and shall be content with nothing – not an iota – less” (Montreal *New Era*, September 26, 1857). McGee reminded readers of the special requirements of parliamentary institutions in a diverse country like Canada: “we must have a representation made up of men of the various origins, opinions and creeds – each zealous and resolute to protect his own, to advance their interests, and to harmonize those interests with the general interest of all Canada” (Montreal *New Era*, November 12, 1857). The Irish were resolved, declared McGee, “to nominate our best men, and what is more, to elect them too” (ibid.).

This call for Irish mobilization raised the whole issue of hyphenated Canadianism, a tension in the New Nationality noted by McGee’s contemporaries. An editorial in one newspaper asked how one could call for an Irish party and at the same time call for an all-encompassing new nationality. Canadian nationhood, it argued, depended on the abandonment of the group loyalties McGee sought to defend: “If there is ever to be a Canadian people, in the best acceptance of the phrase, we must begin

by discarding preferences, and jealousies, and antipathies arising out of that most puerile and ignoble of all differences – the mere accident of national origin” (Montreal *New Era*, January 25, 1858). McGee answered the critique, arguing that once the new nationality was established, “distinct Irishism, like every other *ism* founded on race, will gradually dissolve in it as drift ice does in the gulf stream” (ibid.). Until that day came, he claimed to bow to the necessities of the current state of politics, and leave the rest to time, the new Canadian patriotism acting as a “solvent” in the formation of a people.

Political fragmentation

McGee’s paper grappled with the political dimensions of bringing his national aspirations to life, specifically the fragmented state of the Reform party, which McGee believed was the best vehicle for constitutional change. Since the collapse of the old moderate party of Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin, Reform was not so much a party as a sentiment, a disparate rag-tag group permanently excluded from power, cleaved into a Protestant English-speaking wing in Upper Canada, and a smaller French-speaking wing in Lower Canada. In an article titled *Reunion of the Reformers*, McGee argued that patronage and sectarianism were the two key factors keeping liberals out of power. Sectarianism was a self-inflicted blow, with George Brown’s Protestant popularity in Upper Canada anathematizing him in Lower Canada. McGee stated the time was right for a reconstruction of Reform – for a Reform alliance. There was ample material to “plank a platform” for a “new liberal or national party, co-extensive with the map, and open to every right-hearted man, of every origin, rank and religion” (Montreal *New Era*, September 1, 1857).

“Never was there for a northern land a grander destiny in store – never was there for man’s intelligence a worthier work than to accelerate and assure that destiny.”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

Federation and the future

Like Alexander Galt, McGee argued that federal union could solve Canada’s sectional conflicts and the parochialism of our isolated provinces, and ward off the danger of American encroachment. “We desire the end of old controversies and the opening of new prospects,” wrote McGee. “This may be done by one magic word – nationality. It lays the bitterness of provincial politics with the ghosts of antiquity. It creates a vista for the thoughtful, the patriotic, the young, the loyal, and the brave. It gives us, like the poets, ‘nobler loves and nobler cares.’” (Montreal *New Era*, January 23, 1858). McGee maintained Confederation could end the state of isolation between the provinces, a “shameful state of ignorance” that made it easier to travel “to New Orleans than to New Brunswick” (ibid.).

In October, 1857, the *New Era* reprinted a speech McGee gave at Ottawa titled *The Future of Canada*, a summation of the ideas he had been promoting. An ardent call for federal union, its most important arguments were the necessity of a federal structure for the new Constitution, and the need to recognize French-Canadian aspirations as a cornerstone of the new nationality (Montreal *New Era*, October 22, 1857). McGee argued the provinces lacked the “compactness” or “complete oneness” necessary to form a single state, meaning federalism was the only workable structure for a new Con-

stitution. Canadian circumstances required a loose federation, he argued, with only specific provincial powers delegated to the centre.

McGee urged the right of French-Canadians to their own French-speaking province in the ambit of the new federation. “The autonomy of Lower Canada ought to be cheerfully conceded by the English-speaking Provinces,” argued McGee; it was not too much to claim a French-speaking province, to “ask Lower Canada as an heir-loom” (ibid.). McGee argued French-Canadian history justified demands for the protection of French-Canadian culture, language and institutions: “We must take them as we find them, and while professing to consider them fellow-citizens and fellow-subjects, we must not dishonourably seek to undermine that which they hold dearer than life itself – their social life, their historical rank, their language, their religion, and their nationality” (ibid.).

From this speech, and from the editorial line of the *New Era*, it was clear that McGee had found his life’s Canadian vocation: “I see nothing little in our politics, but the littleness of spirit in which they are approached,” he declared. “Never was there for a northern land a grander destiny in store – never was there for man’s intelligence a worthier work than to accelerate and assure that destiny” (ibid.). Confederation was beginning to take hold in the public mind, and would soon draw attention in politics, the newspapers, and in Parliament, said McGee. It would enlarge and dignify our politics; it was a “great question” and “likely to beget nobler thoughts, than any local interest can inspire.” The pages of the *New Era* glowed with the promise of a new Canada, and the imagination and idealism of its young editor. ◆◆◆

Confronting Sectarian Conflict

Alongside this bright vision was printed gloomy evidence of the bitter sectarian conflict neutralizing Reform as a political movement, blocking the path to its objective of constitutional change. McGee used the pages of the *New Era* to wage a political campaign against the Orange Lodge, an Irish Protestant society imported to Canada, which annually celebrates the 1690 victory of Protestant William of Orange over Catholic James the II at the Battle of the Boyne. Foreign to most Canadians today, its annual parades triggered brawls in the streets of mid-19th-century Canada, as they have been a magnet for violence in Northern Ireland. McGee published polemics against an organization he saw as antithetical to his new Canadian ideal, due to its divisiveness, its secrecy and its outright anti-Catholic bigotry. To McGee the Lodge was the single greatest obstacle to the emergence of the united Canadian nationality he craved.

Orangeism a foreign feud

His first anti-Orange editorial opposed the Lodge’s intent to hold a province-wide meeting in Quebec City. McGee saw this as needlessly provocative, the importation into Canada of a “purely foreign feud” and “anti-social conspiracy” (Montreal *New Era*, June 12, 1857). Orangeism might have had its defensive justifications in the Irish towns of Derry and Enniskillen, he wrote, but had no place being brought across the Atlantic to Canada. It was an illegal and anti-Canadian society, he argued, because its secret oaths were forbidden by Parliament, and because the Protestant ascendancy was no part of the Constitution of Canada. Catholics in Canada had not suffered the same disabilities inflicted on their co-religionists in the United Kingdom, where they were forbidden from holding public office until 1829 (Montreal *New Era*, July 9, 1857).

McGee penned an article explaining the historical origins of the anger Orangeism aroused. To celebrate the Boyne was for the victors to celebrate a civil war, in the face of the descendants of the

vanquished. It was as much a provocation as if the British celebrated the fall of Quebec among French-Canadians. “It is an aggression of the veriest minority on the feelings of the vast majority; it partakes of the narrowness and the concentration of faction; it is a politico-religious celebration of the humiliation of the native altar by the foreign sword” (ibid.).

Picking this fight, McGee had taken on an organization that gave considerable support to the Conservative party, and of which John A. Macdonald was a member. But this was no mere party fight. McGee’s opposition was rooted in a diagnosis that in a land where religious opinions differed, secret societies organized along religious lines would poison the public square, and prevent the emergence of a common national feeling. Yet the heat of McGee’s rhetoric had hardly been conciliatory, and may have inflamed the conflicts he hoped to put down. The pages of the *New Era* were littered with an old-world conflict, setting the stage for clashes with the Orangeman who headed the Conservative party, and with the prejudice consuming Reform from within. The messy business of reconciling ideal and reality was underway. As David Wilson has recounted, McGee knew “how to play political hardball,” and the visionary would be found “cutting moral corners to attain his political objectives”. ♦◆

“What should be the main object,” asked the *New Era*, “of a patriotic representative entering Canadian public life for the first time, in the year of our Lord 1858? We answer . . . the speedy and secure establishment of a Canadian Nationality.”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

Into Politics: The Struggle to Unite Reform

Elected to Parliament as an independent reformer from Montreal, McGee took his campaign for the New Nationality into active politics. “What should be the main object,” asked the *New Era*, “of a patriotic representative entering Canadian public life for the first time, in the year of our Lord 1858? We answer . . . the speedy and secure establishment of a Canadian Nationality. We are convinced the time has come to proclaim the Colony of age; to declare that its period of dependence ought now, of right, to cease” (Montreal *New Era*, Jan 19, 1858). Every important topic, the article declared, would be determined by the one measure: what it would do to promote our national future. Yet Irish Catholics were “deeply divided over political strategy,” David Wilson recounts, caught in a “two-fold dilemma’ between Orange conservatism and Clear Grit radicalism” (Wilson 2011, p. 44). McGee’s ideal would be seriously complicated by political realities, and the nation could never be the measure of all things.

Opposition spokesman: conflicted alliance with George Brown

With Reform ministers ejected from Parliament after the Double Shuffle of August 1858, McGee shot to prominence as the opposition’s chief spokesperson, his first session in Parliament of August

1858 intersecting with the climax of Brown's first, failed drive for constitutional change recounted in *George Brown: The Reformer*. It was a fitting entry point to politics, for the overarching theme of McGee's early years in Parliament was his strained alliance with Brown, through which he hoped to achieve constitutional reform, secure expanded separate school rights for Catholics, and moderate the tone of provincial politics. McGee's attempts to unite Reformers illustrate his struggle to make the New Nationality a reality. As much as if he were holding a pen to a scroll of the British North America Act, McGee was straining to make Canadians into Canadians, into people who could bring a new Constitution to life.

“What As much as if he were holding a pen to a scroll of the British North America Act, McGee was straining to make Canadians into Canadians, into people who could bring such a new Constitution to life.”

His first speech came in the debate on the speech from the throne, levelling a wide-ranging criticism of the Macdonald-Cartier government's policies, and picking a personal fight with Macdonald over his membership in the Orange Lodge. Whether on tariffs, the militia, or the Hudson's Bay territories, the government's policies failed to meet the requirements of the country, said McGee, as did its failure to declare its views on the site of Canada's seat of government (*Scrapbook Debates*, March 10, 1858). Almost half the speech was given over to the attack on Macdonald. The Lodge was too divisive an association for a public officeholder, McGee declared: “the head of a country like this, bidding for emigration and increase of population, has no right to recognize – or declare himself over his own signature – a member of an association which, before courts of justice, have been proved to be inimical to the rights of a portion of the community, and at all events the cause of bloodshed” (ibid.).

Rep by pop and federation

McGee's openness to representation by population signalled his developing alliance with Brown, and marked him out for controversy. Rep by pop was heresy for any politician from Lower Canada, French-Canadian or not, as it breached the principle of equal representation that was seen as a fundamental term of the Union of Upper and Lower Canada. On May 25, McGee declared that “any man who on this continent and in this age of the world, did not believe that numbers should be the basis, was as little to be reasoned with as a man who believed in the philosopher's stone” (*Toronto Globe*, May 26, 1858). The statement came with a warning to Lower Canadian members not to risk future disaster by resisting reasonable demands for change today.

After Galt's federation motion came up in July, as discussed in *Alexander Galt: The Federalist*, McGee again supported representation by population as part of a wider scheme of constitutional reform, with other “safeguards” for Lower Canada necessary to secure her “just rights” (*Scrapbook Debates*, July 5, 1858). McGee made no extensive speech in favour of federal union, only a statement that he regretted Galt hadn't asked for a committee to study confederation: “For three hours had the hon. Gentleman – as Sir Walter Scott said of Allan Cunningham's novels – treated them to fine passages leading to nothing (Laughter).” (ibid.) McGee accused the government of failing in its duty to lead

the country: “The people would have the constitutional changes which they demanded, and the Government which would not march at their head must be dragged at their tail” (ibid.).

The climax of McGee’s first session in Parliament came on August 4, after the collapse of the Brown-Dorion government, when he became spokesman for the defeated Reform ministers. McGee voiced Reformers’ outrage at their ejection from power after only two days, charging Macdonald with orchestrating a plot, his “lawyer-like cunning” the power behind the throne causing the governor general to deny Brown’s request for new elections. There had also been purposeful rumours that McGee would be appointed to remake the province’s education system, a wedge issue designed to exploit prejudice against McGee and tear the Reform alliance along its Protestant-Catholic seam.

Early clash with a future ally: John A. Macdonald

Macdonald fought back with a blistering attack on McGee. This wasn’t the first time McGee had disrespected the sovereign, said Macdonald: “He has carried to this country the disloyalty which he displayed in his own. (Cheers.) He left his own country with the mark of Cain on his brow,” dredging up McGee’s role in the Young Ireland rebellion of 1848. McGee tried to interrupt, twice, only for Macdonald to attack McGee’s eloquence as stolen brilliance: “The hon. Gentleman had better keep his buffoonery for some other time. When he favours the House with those polished sentences, and well-rounded periods that he sometimes indulges in; any man of ordinary reading can detect the plagiarisms that he commits, and can say that is from Sheridan, that from Grattan, that from Curran, and that from Burke, but when we hear low buffoonery from the hon. Gentleman, we know that is from none of them. That is all his own (Cheers and laughter)” (*Scrapbook Debates*, August 4, 1858).

When George-Étienne Cartier announced his new government on August 7, 1858, even its pledge of federation failed to rouse McGee to any enthusiasm. “The farce was played out well,” said McGee, “and now they had the denouement in the return of the old men” (*Scrapbook Debates*, August 7, 1858). He complained at the charges of disloyalty levelled against him: “He was as loyal as any of the Tories of the old school. There was no State Church or bankrupt aristocracy in this country as in the country of his birth. If there were he would rebel against it. He rebelled against Lord John Russell, and not against his Queen. He loved ancient institutions: he was, in fact, something of a conservative in that respect, and if the hon. member himself (Attorney General Macdonald) had been in his position, he would have done the same, for his nature would have inclined him to it.” For now, McGee and Macdonald were opponents, but McGee’s confession of a conservative streak hinted at a coming change of allegiance. ♦

Answering His Critics

McGee’s fraternization with Brown began to attract condemnation from outraged Catholics, a constant tension in the Reform alliance. As David Wilson recounts, several of Toronto’s Catholic newspapers registered their objections, the *Mirror* writing that McGee did not realize the “hopelessness” of his attempted political pact, the *Catholic Citizen* declaring that McGee had a “monomania for quarrel with men of his own race and creed,” calling him the “Catholic Clear Grit.” It was a dilemma of Canadian politics also faced by Cartier and Galt, each man’s actions policed by watchful communities and malevolent enemies, vulnerable to charges that every compromise was evidence of weakness or treason. Just months into his political career and already under fire, McGee answered his critics in two significant announcements.

Changing Reform from within

Published in June 1858, McGee's *Address to the Catholics of Canada West* defended the Reform alliance and called for comprehensive constitutional change, illustrating McGee's strategic positioning at this stage.¹ The article acknowledged the difficulty of reconciling his general legislative duties with the need to represent Catholics across Canada. He appealed to Catholics to understand that the liberal opposition had men of "all shades of opinion," and could not fairly be condemned as a whole. He urged Catholics to change Reform from within as the best hope for change in Canada, even if in some quarters the movement was still marred with prejudice: "I do not despair of seeing as sound and just a spirit finally prevail in the opposition ranks, on Catholic questions, as now exists on most national subjects."

Moderating Mr. Brown

Then he turned to his alliance with Brown, the proximate cause of his political danger. If Brown were ever to form a government, he would have to moderate the invective seen in the pages of the *Globe*: "That spirit can never rule in Canada." On the other hand, if Brown went into government on the old moderate policies of Baldwin and LaFontaine, McGee said he would welcome it. Better to cultivate Brown than write him off in a fit of Irish anger: "if Mr. Brown should unfortunately prefer to rally and rely on the antipathies of religion and race, rather than on reason, justice, and common sense, it places me and places you in a still better position than we held before, if we show our willingness to welcome any act of liberality, from Mr. Brown, just as if it came from any other man or party; no more and no less."

Alliance of French and Irish Canadians

McGee urged Irish Catholics to support a program of constitutional change in favour of federation. Politics in the province was in a confused state, wrote McGee; it resembled "a compound fracture," and some great constitutional change could not be far off. There should be constitutional safeguards for Lower Canada, federal measures securing her autonomy, and the package should be approved by the people. Cooperation between French and Irish Canadians was key: "By rendering the French and Irish more necessary to each other, and the British more just to both, it would . . . tend to hasten the advent of a genuine Canadian Nationality, co-extensive with the country, and enduring as its hills."² But McGee told his readers they must call for the personal attacks against him to stop: "I must not be prejudged, counteracted, and calumniated, by persons unwarrantably using your name, but really in the pay of one wing of the party at present in power."³

Against the abolition of Catholic schools

The companion to this printed address was an important speech against the abolition of Catholic separate schools in Upper Canada, the most vulnerable point in the Reform alliance setting the Protestant Upper Canada wing against its Lower Canada allies. McGee placed the issue "on the high ground of inherent right – of natural right which no law can take away". He spoke of a provincial pivot connecting the Protestant and Catholic minorities in Upper and Lower Canada to their watchful coreligionists elsewhere, and appealed to Protestant Reformers' sense of reciprocity: "To hon. Gentlemen on this side of the House . . . I would say, educate your children your own way, but allow us to educate ours. We don't want to interfere with your Common Schools, we only want to keep our own children out of them" (ibid.). It was a stirring appeal, but a sign of bitter conflict eating away at his party from within, which McGee would struggle in vain to suppress. ◆◆

Uniting Reformers of Upper and Lower Canada

After his opening act in Parliament, McGee took the case for party unity to Upper Canada, appearing at political meetings and banquets in London, Hamilton, Toronto and Kingston. If Reform was going to establish McGee's New Nationality, his efforts to unite the Reformers of Upper and Lower Canada had to succeed. In a speech at London on September 15, 1858, McGee hoped the day would come when the word "Reformer" was not qualified by any other adjective dividing one part of the party against another. "I hope the time is not distant when the common voice of the Reform party throughout the Province will declare that by their politics shall men alone be known – that throwing aside all religious denominationalism, be it Protestant or Roman Catholic – (loud cheers) – and rejoicing in the common name of Reformers, having common objects in view, we shall harmoniously battle side by side for the maintenance and establishment of our common principles" (Toronto *Globe*, September 17, 1858).

“Their rights as parents should be sacredly preserved, and any Separate Schools they might desire to maintain, should have the full protection of the law of the land.”

Religious freedom and minority rights

McGee took the fight for separate schools to the heart of Protestant Upper Canada, arguing that minority rights had to prevail, and that the issue had to be overcome if Reform was to be an effective political force. Ordinary political questions were more easily settled, with people of all religions applying “worldly wisdom” to settle them. The school question was more difficult, a “temporal tree with a theological trunk,” and “surrounded by difficulty” because it implicated religious opinions. The “sectarian war” had to be closed, and the school system reformed to make it “acceptable to all creeds and classes.” If found oppressive to any religious minority, he said, “however small the minority, I would never deny them a remedy – whether it is a Protestant minority in Lower Canada, or a Roman Catholic minority in Upper Canada.” He continued: “Their rights as parents should be sacredly preserved, and any Separate Schools they might desire to maintain, should have the full protection of the law of the land.”

Defending the alliance with George Brown

McGee still believed Reform could return to power as the political instrument of constitutional change, and closed defending his unnatural alliance with George Brown. He wanted Brown given a fair chance to govern, and saw himself, an Irish Catholic, best placed to press this claim on the Protestant Scotsman's behalf. McGee explained the view he had formed of Brown since entering Parliament in February: “I was soon satisfied that Mr. Brown had been grossly misrepresented to my coreligionists.” Brown might be a man who “when struck is likely to strike back, who if hard names

are called returns them in kind; which is no doubt an error in a statesman.” Yet Brown had welcomed six Catholics into his Cabinet. “Was that the act of a bigot?” (Slattery, p. 120)

Cross-cutting allegiances were working against both men: as Brown was accused of betraying Upper Canada to the French, so too was McGee now accused of betraying his people to Brown. Gradually he was forced onto the defensive. After the parliamentary session of 1859, McGee returned to Montreal and gave a speech defending his motivations in politics (*Toronto Globe*, May 21, 1859). When he entered Parliament, some had predicted he would take the easy path of religious polemics, taking on any who attacked the Catholic faith: “If I had been weak and wicked enough to go into that House, with a desire . . . to play the incendiary’s part, how many of those who blamed you originally for having chosen me on such short acquaintance, would have said: ‘Look at your man now; to what does he devote himself?’” McGee told his constituents: “I did not think that taking that course was the way to represent you.”

Responding to mounting criticism in the press, McGee composed an extended analysis of Canada’s political problems, and the relations of the Irish Catholic community to them, serialized in the *Freeman* newspaper as *Four Letters to a Friend*. The fourth letter examined the Irish role in the Reform party of Upper Canada, urging an end to the religious feuds sapping the strength of Reform (*Toronto Globe*, July 11, 1859). School question aside, Catholic and Protestant Reformers shared common principles: hostility to privilege, caste and Toryism in general, choice in schools, extension of voting rights, self-government free from British interference, and efficiency in government spending. He called for a constitutional convention and a new fundamental law for Canada, with a Bill of Rights securing religious liberties. As a principle to enshrine in a new constitution, he pointed to the liberty of conscience guaranteed to Catholics after the capitulation of Quebec, secured in the Treaty of Paris of 1763: “Transfer it from the musty scrolls of old diplomacy, to our own virgin soil, and, like the grains of Egyptian wheat taken from the cerements of a mummy to be planted in the New World, it will bear fruit a hundred and a thousand fold” (ibid.).

“These men did not hesitate to take under their care three millions of people, while they were making light of truth in the very alphabet of constitutional government, through the means of checks, safeguards, and guarantees.”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

Settling sectarian feuds

McGee claimed the Brown alliance was a sacrifice in the greater cause of settling the sectarian feuds dividing Canada: “We took the foremost man in Upper Canada . . . and we said ‘you have done us wrong in days past; but for the sake of our common country, we propose, not a truce, but a peace. Let bygones be bygones, else there can be no peace in the land, and no hope from its politics.’” (ibid.). Whatever some might say about the party leadership, McGee was going to stick with Brown so long as he remained committed to constitutional change, provided he remained “tolerant to all men.” In the fall of 1859, Brown was preparing for the Reform convention, drafting the constitutional resolutions which would be submitted to the convention as the basis for a newly united party. McGee dispatched

a letter to Brown on September 21, telling him he hoped to do much in Montreal to “second” the demands of Upper Canada, and making an offer to organize support in Upper Canada – predicting that fully two thirds of Catholic Irish there would vote against the Cartier-Macdonald government in the next election.

Reform’s constitutional mission

A major speech on party unity followed in Toronto, reported in full in the next day’s *Globe*, turning on the theme of Reform’s constitutional mission (Toronto *Globe*, September 29, 1859). The Cartier-Macdonald conservatives had been mocking the Brown-Dorion government’s support for rep by pop with “checks and guarantees” to secure French-Canadian institutions. McGee declared the government discredited itself with its mockery of constitutional politics: “These men did not hesitate to take under their care three millions of people, while they were making light of truth in the very alphabet of constitutional government, through the means of checks, safeguards, and guarantees.” McGee warned Cartier against digging in his heels against change: “Go on as you are going; heap up wrath against the day of wrath – create a precedent for injustice, and in the short and angry day of the ultimate controversy when numbers alone will triumph, then you will find if you had been wise in time you would have met your brethren of Upper Canada half way.” Sound advice, but McGee’s speaking tour had done as much to reveal the weaknesses sapping Reform’s effectiveness as a political force, as it had to galvanize a faltering cause. ♦

“By this division of power the General Government would be relieved from those questions of a purely local and sectional character.”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

Federation the Way Forward

Fixing the Canadian Union

The high tide of Reform’s drive for constitutional change came with the Convention of 1859, and Brown’s 1860 resolutions on federation. At the end of October, McGee signed his name to the manifesto of the Lower Canada opposition on constitutional change. Masterfully crafted, it was a succinct analysis of the constitutional problems plaguing Canada, a declaration that federalism was the solution, and a party political document signalling the unity of Reformers just before Brown’s convention in Upper Canada. “A grave constitutional crisis has arisen . . .” it began, “which imposes on the Liberal party of Lower Canada duties of corresponding gravity” (Toronto *Globe*, October 31, 1859). It had been apparent for years, it continued, that the relationship of Upper and Lower Canada had to change. The question was how to fix the structural flaws of the Union. There was an overriding imperative to keep the country united, for those who “would look beyond the present, and would frame our institutions with reference to the future destiny of our country” (ibid.)

Federation was the way forward, McGee and the Lower-Canada Reformers declared: “whether we consider the present needs or the probable future condition of the country, the true, the statesman-like solution is to be sought in the substitution of a purely Federative, for the present so-called, Legislative Union” (ibid.). McGee’s brand of federation at this date was decentralized. He proposed a federal government restricted to dealing with “the few easily defined subjects of common or national concern,” leaving the provinces with “supreme jurisdiction in all other matters” (ibid.). Federation would give each Province “every guarantee for the integrity of their respective institutions” (ibid.). With the prospect that the Upper Canada convention would declare in favour of federation, it was “imperative” for Lower Canada Liberals to declare their support. If the convention initiative was resisted, McGee warned, all reasonable grounds for opposition to rep by pop would disappear, and a danger arose it would be imposed.

Unity through federation

Most remarkable of all, the manifesto argued that through a federal division of the provinces, unity could be manufactured in Canada. Split the united province, and you could create a united nation, using the division of powers to carve out concord where at present there was only conflict, confusion and corruption. “By this division of power the General Government would be relieved from those questions of a purely local and sectional character, which, under our present system, have led to so much strife and ill-will, and have enabled an unscrupulous Government, by subsisting on the mutual jealousies and antipathies of the people of the different sections, to plunge the country into financial difficulties, from which it will take years of frugality and good management to extricate it” (ibid.). With Galt and Cartier across the floor committed to Confederation, every significant political party in Canada had been led to the conclusion that federalism was the future.

Days later, McGee wrote to Brown to say he looked forward to the success of the Reform convention, and to reaffirm his commitment to the party alliance. “Acting as we have done together, during the present Parliament, I have been always ready to do you justice, and to discourage, suppress, and extinguish if possible, every sparkle of the old animosities, which have unfortunately existed between Protestants and Catholics in Upper Canada.”⁴ He worried that the Convention might be used as a platform to revive those conflicts, warning Brown that on its outcome rested the truthfulness of the arguments he had pressed on his Catholic supporters that Reform could change from within.

“Men do not talk on this continent of changes wrought by centuries, but of the events of years.” Thomas D’Arcy McGee

The Shield of Achilles

McGee’s address to the legislature on Brown’s 1860 federation resolutions was the occasion of one of his most famous speeches, *The Shield of Achilles*. The speech was also the climax of McGee’s struggle to unite Reform behind Brown’s constitutional mission. The House was addressing no ordinary question, he said, but the fundamental principles of government, whether Canada’s legislature was properly constituted, literally “whether or not to be here.” Other governments faced this question before, he pointed out, discussing debates of 1774, 1791, and the 1830s before and after the rebellion of 1837. Now Canadians were gripped with the question of what to do with the Union of 1840.

The existing Constitution was finished, argued McGee, attacking those like Cartier who claimed it could be maintained. The Union had been “frittered away,” he said, and now “hangs in tatters upon the ex-

panding frame of this colony” (McGee 1865b, 164). This was the “shattered idol” we were “called upon to worship,” the “carcass” we were now asked to rely upon for good government. The Union had been conceived in sin, with its aim of “swamping the French,” he argued. Although a unionist, said McGee, it did not follow that he must be “for this Act of Union and for no other” (ibid., 164).

Canada had come too far “to halt in our march towards nationality,” declared McGee (ibid., 173). The age pointed in the direction of progress, and every argument showed the way to federation: “Men do not talk on this continent of changes wrought by centuries, but of the events of years. Men do not vegetate in this age as they did formerly, in one spot, occupying one position. Thought outruns the steam car, and hope outflies the telegraph. We live more in ten years in this era than the patriarchs did in a thousand” (ibid., 175). McGee drew to his famous close, words which many Canadians know, but which fewer appreciate came as the capstone of a long political struggle to shore up a splintering party:

I look to the future of my adopted country with hope, though not without anxiety; I see in the not remote distance, one great nationality bound, like the shield of Achilles, by the blue rim of ocean – I see it quartered into many communities – each disposing of its internal affairs – but all bound together by free institutions, free intercourse, and free commerce; I see within the round of that shield, the peaks of the Western mountains and the crests of the Eastern waves – the winding Assinaboine, the five-fold lakes, the St. Lawrence, the Ottawa, the Saguenay, the St. John, and the Basin of Minas – by all these flowing waters, in all the valleys they fertilise, in all the cities they visit in their courses, I see a generation of industrious, contented, moral men, free in name and in fact, – men capable of maintaining, in peace and in war, a Constitution worthy of such a country. (ibid., 175–176).

McGee’s words were the last flash of the falling comet of Brown’s bid for constitutional change. Reform’s dream of remaking the Constitution had been exhausted by the party’s inability to build an effective political coalition traversing divides in the old province of Canada. The fault was not in their stars, as McGee said, it was their own: Reform’s sectionalism was a fatal strategic flaw. On the tenuous Brown-McGee alliance had rested the hope that *they* and not Macdonald and Cartier might be the instrument of constitutional change. Reform’s greatest accomplishment had been to force their opponents to concede the necessity of constitutional change, and to grind the old Union into dysfunction. McGee himself was destined to cross the floor, attracted to a party that could deliver protections for Catholic separate schools, and that just might be destined to deliver Confederation. ♦♦

Reform Alliance: Strained to Breaking Point

McGee’s attempts make the Reform alliance work led to blowback sapping his political strength as a representative of the Irish Canadian community. The problems McGee experienced highlight the cross-cutting circles of loyalty McGee had to navigate in politics, tracing tensions between group loyalties, political necessities, and the attempt to raise up a new Canadian national identity. McGee’s attempts to counsel moderation and suppress violence in the annual St. Patrick’s Day parades tried to defuse an ethnic and religious rift that threatened civil peace in 19th

century Canada. His struggle for Catholic separate schools was steadfastly resisted by Brown and Upper Canada Reform – exposing McGee to criticism for backing the wrong horse. McGee’s failed attempt to moderate Reform also shows the important disciplining effect failure to accommodate minority rights has on Canadian politicians. The wreckage of the McGee-Brown alliance culminated in McGee crossing the floor to the Liberal-Conservatives.

Communal tensions

Shortly after his maiden speech in 1858, McGee was attacked by a mob on St. Patrick’s Day, stones thrown at his carriage, and the ground floor of the building where he had attended a dinner party ransacked. An Orange-Catholic brawl had broken out earlier, when the parade was disrupted by an Orange cabman driving his horse and trap through the procession. A man was killed in the course of the fighting. McGee returned to Montreal a hero, greeted by a crowd of 10,000. Speaking from the steps of his home, McGee said the vast majority of Protestants in Toronto deplored the violence that had taken place, and the “unsleeping spirit of hatred, from which those outrages arose.” It was unclear whether prosecution would avenge the death, he wrote, whether “justice is strong enough, in Toronto, to reach into the darkest recesses of the lodge, and drag out the guilty even from the Grand Master’s chair” (*Montreal New Era*, March 25, 1858). In the end, no one went to trial for the murder.

The honour of St. Patrick

McGee tried to reduce communal tensions by shutting down the annual St. Patrick’s Day parade – opening a vulnerable flank to criticism by radical Irish who saw this as truckling to Orange intimidation. In a speech to the Young Men’s St. Patrick’s Association, McGee argued an open house for the Irish community was a better way to inspire respect than any “draggel-tail procession through the muddy thoroughfares of this great city” (*Toronto Globe*, March 18, 1859). The parade only “brought ridicule on the Irish people,” and had come at the cost of murder: “No gratification individuals might derive from a procession could be a compensation for the fact that a poor woman who saw her husband go out in the morning in health and strength, found him, ere night had passed away, lying upon the hospital bed in the agonies of death” (*ibid.*). Yet McGee’s stance was condemned: Bernard Devlin, an Irish Canadian lawyer who had been among the group inviting McGee to migrate to Montreal, turned against him in an anonymous letter to the press: “Is it thus, and with such vulgar slang, that a Catholic Irishman should designate a solemn procession, sanctified by his religion, personally participated in by the Priests of his Church, and exclusively composed of his countrymen – the people to whom he belongs?” (Wilson, 2011, pp. 76–77).

No parade was held the following three years, but the criticism struck home, and McGee was forced to defend himself at a banquet held in his honour later that year. He explained away the “draggeltail” turn of phrase as “half in jest, half in earnest,” saying he in no way merited the charge of dishonouring St. Patrick (*Toronto Globe*, September 29, 1859). “Oh! Gentlemen, it was a base ruse of party warfare, to endeavour to put strife between you and me, on such a pretension of zeal for the honour of St. Patrick.” Such was the strange force of prejudice coming to bear on McGee, that this most Irish of Canadians found himself under attack for betraying the feast of Ireland’s patron saint.

The Prince of Orangeism and the Catholic Church

Two serious attacks on McGee’s reputation as a politician and a Catholic show the political challenges McGee faced trying to defend the Reform alliance. The Catholic newspaper *True Witness* published a series of vitriolic condemnations. How could McGee support Brown, the “Prince of Orangeism”, who resolutely opposed Catholic separate schools, who planned to impose a Protestant ascendancy through rep by pop? Only ambition for a government post could explain such a thing: McGee was a

“traitor to his religion and a rank hypocrite.”⁵ The Catholic Church also took the offensive, Bishop Ignace Bourget issuing a letter supporting the *True Witness*, signed by every Catholic bishop in Canada, attacking politicians unnamed who exploited “prejudices of race.”⁶ McGee tried to parry the blow, dispatching a letter to church allies, professing to agree with much of Bourget’s attack, and obtained from Bishop Armand-François-Marie de Charbonnel and Vicar General Jean-Marie Bruyère a public letter in his defense (Wilson, 2011, p. 86). But when Charbonnel was replaced with John Joseph Lynch in 1860, the new prelate also rejected McGee’s alliance, choosing to back the Liberal-Conservatives as the surest way to secure Catholic separate schools in Upper Canada (Wilson, 2011, p. 105).

““ Oh! Gentlemen, it was a base ruse of party warfare, to endeavour to put strife between you and me, on such a pretension of zeal for the honour of St. Patrick.”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

Shifting sands in Reform

The shifting sands of the McGee-Brown alliance were becoming increasingly untenable, and Brown was also made to feel the heat in Upper Canada. In an editorial titled “The Brown-McGee Alliance”, the *Globe* noted that the conservatives wanted to distract voters from their own wrongdoing, seeking “by inculcating the notion that Mr. McGee is, in some way or other, plotting their injury, and that he is, in so doing, assisted, or to be assisted by Mr. George Brown” (Toronto *Globe*, January 7, 1860). At an 1860 Reform party rally in Galt, a heckler shouted at Brown “What about McGee,” to which Brown gave a famous reply. “Does he mean that as a reproach? (No answer.) If he does, let me tell him that I would a thousand times rather act with Mr. McGee than with the dough-faced Protestants that misrepresent Upper Canada” (Toronto *Globe*, September 20, 1860). Brown admitted he had been prejudiced against McGee before he entered Parliament, but what man, Brown asked, had given stronger support to representation by population, or better denounced the wrongdoing of the Cartier-Macdonald government?

Catholic schools – and a threat to cross the floor

More than any other, the issue that broke the McGee-Brown alliance was separate schools. Many Reformers never came around to McGee’s blandishments and resolutely opposed the bill put forward each year by M.P. P. Thomas Scott to expand Catholic school rights in Upper Canada. Introducing his bill in April 1862, Scott said Upper Canada Catholics “labored under disabilities of a serious nature, and their prayer for the removal of these disabilities should be granted” (*Scrapbook Debates*, April 30, 1860). He pointed out how well the system was working in Lower Canada, calling for debate “with a freedom from bigotry which too often characterized the conduct of hon. Members on questions of this nature” (ibid.). The bill’s changes now seem benign. To establish a separate school, it would only require enough parents and students sufficient to support it. Two districts were allowed to join, where otherwise numbers would not merit a Catholic school. Parents could claim exemption from paying public school taxes once and for all, rather than annually.

McGee made a short but remarkable speech on May 1 that shook up the Reform alliance – it contained an open threat to cross the floor: “If the course of this debate should satisfy him that the religious liberties of the Roman Catholic minority of the people of Upper Canada were more safe in

the hands of what was called the Conservative party than what they were in the hands of the Reform party in this House, however painful it might be to him personally, he should not hesitate to make his choice in favour of the party who would guarantee the religious rights and liberties of the Roman Catholic minority of Upper Canada” (*Scrapbook Debates*, May 1, 1860). The debate exposed Reform’s raw nerves. One by one Reformers announced their opposition, claiming the bill would damage the public system, drawing from McGee a stark warning: “no earthly object would deter him from preferring the Conservative party, if they were tolerant on this question, over any other party who were intolerant, no matter what were the points on which he agreed or disagreed with them in reference to the other subjects which came before the House and the country.”⁷⁷ (Ibid.)

“No earthly object would deter him from preferring the Conservative party, if they were tolerant on this question, over any other party who were intolerant.”

A classical view of religious freedom

When Scott’s bill was debated again the next year, McGee delivered a speech that deserves to be known by all Canadian friends of civil and religious liberty as one of the best of its type in all Canadian history. Reform was now in government under John Sandfield Macdonald, and McGee said the party bore a greater responsibility: “those who would refuse a whole community of people coming to this House in a very proper manner for legal redress, a committee of inquiry into alleged grievances, cramping and oppressing conscience – that those who would reject their prayer, answering it by a summary negative, are, from my point of view, enemies to religious freedom” (McGee, 1863, pp. 4–5). Who were they to deny Catholics religious instruction? In a matter which “concerns the mind, the spirit, the immortal soul,” who were these members to appoint themselves judges? “Those who plead religious objections to the divorce of religion from school teaching are entitled in a free State to have their religious freedom respected by the secular authority – the State.”

McGee’s stand was informed by a classical view of religious freedom. “My theory of religious freedom, Sir, is this, that as long as any body of people, Pagan or Christian, render the minimum of obedience to the civil power, as long as they dwell in peace within the precincts of the Constitution anywhere, they are entitled to the maximum of freedom in the exercise of their religious practices, doctrines and worship. Let them bear the burthens of taxation, obey the tribunals, fulfill their contracts, and be governed by the common moral obligations sanctioned in the law of the land; and as for my part, speaking as a Legislator, they may believe or disbelieve whatever they like or dislike” (McGee 1863, 6). The separate school bill was not an invention of the church, nor a “got up debate.” It was a “fathers’ and mothers’ bill” (ibid., 9) rooted in the hopes of parents for their children, and ultimately in a claim that the soul was the province of true education.

Clearing the way for better politics

Yet McGee had the realism to want a final settlement of this nettling question that had plagued Canadian politics for too long. He promised to make the bill a finality, and spoke of clearing the way for a better sort of politics. “The exclusion of this question from the arena will restore the rule of legitimate politics; it will no longer be possible for unfit and insincere men to find their way into this

House, with the certificate of a Catholic bishop in the one pocket and the card of an Orange lodge in the other” (ibid., 12). He welcomed the bill as “tending to the extinction of sectarian war” (ibid.). He had never been “party to bigotry” in Reform party ranks, he said, whether aimed at Catholics or at George Brown. “I always felt that we are all interested – every way interested – in getting under and keeping under sectarian warfare – and for this crowning reason, I hope to see this measure passed into law during the present session” (ibid., 13).

Isolated in the Sandfield government

Briefly a minister in the Sandfield government, McGee found himself uneasy, isolated by its policies on defence, its preference for retrenchment versus development, and its lukewarm railway and immigration policies (Wilson, 2011, p. 159). When Richard Scott’s bill finally passed, mostly with the strength of Lower Canada Catholic votes, Upper Canada Reformers almost unanimously rejected the bill. To McGee, a sitting minister in a supposedly liberal government, the experience must have been a repudiation of all he had worked for, final proof that the Reform alliance had borne no fruit, with Catholic rights secured by mostly conservative votes. Even some of the Orange conservatives he had once vilified supported the bill. As David Wilson remarks, McGee “might well find that he had more in common with John A. Macdonald’s Liberal Conservatives than with Sandfield Macdonald’s Reformers” (ibid., 151). ♦◆♦

“Under that flag of the triple cross of St. Andrew, St. Patrick, and St. George, encircled with the native maple-wreath, I desire to labour for – I have labored for making and keeping as one united people.”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

Crossing the Floor

Dropped from cabinet

McGee was dropped from cabinet after failing to show up to defend the government during a no-confidence debate. He had become a political liability: his support of separate schools alienated supporters in the west, his federalism was out of step with Sandfield who promised only the double majority principle, his support for railway expansion clashed with other members of the cabinet. He left government disappointed at friends that had betrayed him, but also with a sense of relief: “After a year’s self-denial in office, where I had the name, without the reality of power, I find myself personally relieved, by quitting a false position – into which I had fallen from want of accurate knowledge of some of my confreres – and from which there was no escape, but resignation.”⁸

Once again, McGee was an independent, appealing to his constituents in 1863 and promising to remain true to his national policy.⁹ “I have now no leader but my own conscience,” he declared: “Under

that flag of the triple cross of St. Andrew, St. Patrick, and St. George, encircled with the native maple-wreath, I desire to labour for – I have labored for making and keeping as one united people (cheers), and my name shall be remembered for these labours when all these petty intriguers are forgotten.”¹⁰

Conservative overtures – the “constant Irishman”

That summer, McGee published a series of letters to the Montreal *Gazette* reviving an idea he had first floated in the *New Era* – transplanting a prince of the British royal family to found a wholly Canadian monarchy.¹¹ The picture McGee painted was of his steady conversion to monarchism, with reverence for authority and permanency, sound conservative values with the strength to resist the encroaching democracy of the United States. This was a convenient overture to the Liberal-Conservative party. The *Globe* was scathing, pointing out the free soil of North America was ill suited to the transplantation of a system that thrived on hierarchy and the traditions of a thousand years (Toronto *Globe*, July 7, 1863). Another editorial mocked McGee as the “constant Irishman,” conceiving one fevered political vision after another:

Yesterday he was an Irish patriot, today a British Tory, tomorrow he may be a Yankee Copperhead, and the next day perhaps an Elder at Salt Lake. For each he has a vocation while the fit lasts; he is a great actor, who imagines himself the character he strives to imitate. If he would stick to one part, he would make people believe that he was a genuine character, but the poetic temperament is a mercurial one, and he changes his dress so fast that spectators see that he is only an actor after all. Each party which, in turn, claims his service, rejoices to hear its dogmas presented, and his rounded sentences and flowing periods, and they think that they have made a great acquisition, but the scene shifts, and they are startled and shocked to hear the same melodious voice and finished elocution, enunciating the views of their opponents. They think they are betrayed. Not at all, it is only a clever political orator, poet and actor going through his part (Toronto *Globe*, September 4, 1863).

Whether or not manufacturing principle to cover political necessity, McGee’s attempt to liberalize Reform was definitely at an end, and he reflected publicly on a political strategy that lay in ruins. Writing to the Montreal *Gazette*, he asked whether he had been illiberal when he defended Brown in 1858: “I have been a bridge between the estranged ranks of the old Reform party of Upper Canada. I have given the *Globe* and its conductors an opportunity and an example for conciliation, and they, in return...have turned round upon me, after so many years of self-sacrificing cooperation on my part, not only endeavouring to revive old hoarded and long withheld personalities, but to discredit a broad and generous policy, in which I feel far more interested than I do in any personal issue. I abandon all hope of making good, liberal-minded men out of the *Globe* people” (Toronto *Globe*, September 17, 1863).

Railway crossing – joining the Liberal-Conservatives

In a debate on the Intercolonial Railway in early October 1863, McGee finally crossed the floor. He had supported railway development as part of his national policy, and been chairman of the 1863 Intercolonial Conference that discussed the project. The Canadian government had been accused of bad faith in the negotiations that followed, and McGee harshly criticized his former colleagues’ course of action. The government were a “pack of tricksters,” its published record of the negotiations “an uncandid document, discreditable and injurious in the highest degree . . .” (*Scrapbook Debates*, October 2, 1863). When McGee’s former criticism of his new conservative allies was raised, McGee said Macdonald and Cartier had been “open, manly” enemies. “The best friends he ever made were made on the field of battle, and he hoped he would make him his friend in the same frank, outspoken manner as he had made him his enemy. (Hear, hear from Mr. Cartier, and Opposition cheers)” (ibid.).

McGee's writings suggest he decided his national policy was the best way back to prominence in national politics. That summer, he published two articles in the *British American Magazine*, titled *A Plea for British American Nationality*, renewing the call for a national policy he had made since arriving in Canada.¹² He rejoiced that discussions on federal union were again afoot, frankly admitting that Canada must choose between closer connection to Britain, guaranteed neutrality, or annexation to the United States. McGee argued Canadians needed a constitution they could admire, which would inspire their allegiance, "a constitution, framed from our own *sensus communis*; the offspring and image of our own intelligence; a constitution to love and to live for; a cherished inheritance for our children; in comprehension, noble; in justice, admirable; in wisdom, venerable."¹³ ◆◆

“A constitution to love and to live for; a cherished inheritance for our children; in comprehension, noble; in justice, admirable; in wisdom, venerable.”

Thomas D'Arcy McGee

A Constant Canada, a New National Identity

McGee crossed the floor just in time to take part as a Liberal-Conservative in the final acts leading up to Confederation. Days after McGee's conversion, Alexander Galt gave his non-confidence speech foreshadowing the revival of his federation project of 1858, and George Brown gave notice of his request for a constitutional committee. McGee's role in the unfolding doings of 1864-67 was significant – though he was excluded from the London Conference putting the final touches on Confederation, and dropped by Macdonald from the first federal cabinet of 1867. Yet of all the Fathers of Confederation, it is perhaps McGee that is best remembered alongside Macdonald and Cartier. What is the source of McGee's continuing popularity? Doubtless sheer eloquence has attracted generations of Canadians, but also important is the attraction of his ideas. Washing away the 19th century particular, there is a McGee who speaks to a constant Canada that can still be recognized in his words today.

Imagining Canada's new national community

From his *New Era* days, McGee had taken an active part imagining a new national identity for Canada. Like the modern historian Benedict Anderson, McGee realized that nations were imagined communities (Anderson, 1992), and applied his Canadian political career to the invention of Canada. "The gigantic, dislocated fragments of British America, appeal to our hearts, our senses, and our reason; there they lie outstretched, longing for unity," he avowed. "If we are a generation worthy to organize a nation, assuredly the materials are abundant and are at hand" (McGee 1865b, 73). Reasons for

union were all around, “reasons as thick as blackberries,” (ibid., 109) he would say, to form a nation with “strength and authority in the government, justice and truth in its councils, and liberty everywhere – a country to be admired and respected by all nations” (ibid., 79–80).

“*If we are a generation worthy to organize a nation, assuredly the materials are abundant and are at hand.*”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

The advantages of national unity

McGee linked national unity to important political advantages. First, a larger country would form a deep reservoir of moderation, protection against extreme politics in any of its parts. As he said in 1861: “unity is to liberty as the cistern in the desert to the seldom sent shower; that of liberty we may truly say, though Providence should rain it down upon our heads, though the land should thirst for it, till it gaped at every pore, without a legal organization to retain, without a supreme authority to preserve the Heaven-sent blessing, all in vain are men called free, all in vain are States declared to be independent” (ibid., 26). Second, like Alexander Galt, McGee believed national unity could end the localism of petty sectional politics, by giving Canadians the higher aims of national patriotism. “Why are our ordinary politics so personal; why are our great men sometimes found so small?” McGee asked. “Because we are sectional and provincial in spirit as well as in fact; we are not simply shut up in our several corners, but we subdivide those corners into pettiest domains” (ibid., 62–63). Third, McGee believed national unity would protect minority rights, raising up a federal government that because composed of heterogeneous elements, and dealing with larger interests, would set a better standard for the country: “local prejudices, and all other prejudices, will fall more and more into contempt, while our statesmen will rise more and more superior to such low and pitiful politics” (ibid., 9–10).

Loyalty to the whole through liberty of the parts

McGee promoted federalism as a manufacturer of national unity, the structural adjustment that creates loyalty to the whole by protecting the liberty of the parts. With the French speaking population of Quebec guarding its language, laws and institutions, McGee argued that “the Federal form of government, the compromise between great states and small, seems peculiarly adapted to conciliate difficulties of this description, and to keep politically together men of different origins and languages” (McGee 1865c, 9). He published a study on federations from ancient Greece to modern times, and linked the design of Canada’s constitution to differences in language and culture overcome in Switzerland and Belgium (McGee 1865a). McGee also made some of the original, best utterances of Canadian, as opposed to provincial, patriotism. “For his own part he had never been a sectional man. He had no sectional partialities in this country. He was neither a Lower Canadian nor an Upper Canadian. In the Government, or out of the Government, he had never known what the old Province line was. The province line was obliterated before he came to the country, and never should be restored with his consent” (McGee 1865b, 38).

Minority rights

As a Catholic who had fought for separate schools, McGee emphasized the importance of minority rights in a diverse country, pointing to the educational guarantees he had helped to secure: “in expressly providing in the Constitution for the educational rights of the minority, we had taken every guarantee, legislative, judicial and educational, against the oppression of a sectional minority by the sectional majority” (McGee 1865c, 9). McGee also highlighted the special role of the federal government as guardian of minority rights. Speaking to an audience of Lower Canada Protestants in 1864, McGee said Canadians did not have to “tolerate being tolerated”; they had guarantees: “your special institutions, religious and educational, as well as all your general and common franchises and rights, will be secured under the broad seal of the empire, which the strong arm of the General Government will suffer no bigot to break, and no province to lay its finger on, should any one be foolish enough to attempt it” (ibid., 10).

“Let it be the mad desire of others in Europe and America to lay waste populous places; let it be our better ambition to populate waste places.”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

Immigration and new Canadians

McGee underlined the importance of immigration to Canada, making classical declarations of the duty of Canadians to welcome newcomers. He viewed the immigrant as a “founder . . . greater than kings and nobles, because he is destined to conquer for himself, and not by the hired hands of other men, his sovereign dominion over some share of the earth’s surface. (Cheers).” (McGee 1865b, 230–231) He prized immigrants for their *choice* to come to Canada, meriting equality with the native-born: “when the man of another country, wherever born, speaking whatever speech, holding whatever creed, seeks out a country to serve and honour and cleave to, in weal or in woe, when he heaves up the anchor of his heart from its old moorings, and lays at the feet of the mistress of his choice, his new country, all the hopes of his ripe manhood, he establishes by such devotion a claim to consideration, not second even to that of the children of the soil” (McGee 1865b, 35–36). He contrasted Canada’s mission to accept newcomers with the warlike preoccupations of other countries: “Let it be the mad desire of others in Europe and America to lay waste populous places; let it be our better ambition to populate waste places. In this we shall approach nearest to the Divine original, whose image, however defaced, we bear within us; in this we shall become makers and creators of new communities and a new order of things” (ibid., 231).

Obligations of newcomers to Canada

Yet McGee also spoke of the obligations of newcomers to Canada, insisting they had a duty to hold Canada first in their hearts: “We have a country which, being the land of our choice, should also have our first consideration . . . our first duty is to the land where we live and have fixed our homes, and where, while we live, we must find the true sphere of our duties . . .” (ibid., 7–8). Old country quarrels had to be left behind:

In Canada, with men of all origins and all kinds of culture, if we do not bear and forbear, if we do not get rid of old quarrels, but on the contrary make fresh ones, – whereas we ought to have lost sight of the old when we lost sight of the capes and headlands of the old country – if we will carefully convey across the Atlantic half-extinguished embers of strife in order that we may by them light up the flames of our inflammable forests – if each neighbour will try not only to nurse up old animosities, but to invent new grounds of hostility to his neighbor – then, gentlemen, we shall return to what Hobbes considered the state of Nature – I mean a state of war (ibid., 6–7).

Like Cartier, McGee argued that justice could harden our national concrete – it was the essential ingredient to combine a people of diverse national, religious and linguistic origins. If Canada was to be a nation, McGee said, “we shall only do so by being just to all men, of every origin, speech, and creed, who may desire to come amongst us, to aid in that great work” (ibid., 120). McGee also spoke out against hyphenated Canadianism: “A Canadian nationality, not French-Canadian, nor British-Canadian, nor Irish-Canadian – patriotism rejects the prefix” (ibid., 35). Yet as David Wilson argues, this statement should not be misunderstood as a call for Canadian homogeneity. Instead, McGee wanted an identity that “superseded but did not abolish ethno-religious identities” (Wilson, 2011, p. 132). His activism in the Irish community, his support for federalism, and his calls for a Canadian nationality giving “full credit to all the elements which at present day compose our population” (McGee 1865b, 36–37) were all important qualifications of McGee’s one-Canada patriotism. But he also believed there were proper limits to group recognition in Canada, seeing “room enough in this country for one great free people,” but not for “two or three angry, suspicious, obstructive nationalities” (ibid., 35.).

“A Canadian nationality, not French-Canadian, nor British-Canadian, nor Irish-Canadian – patriotism rejects the pr

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

Cultural independence

Another tension in Canada’s new nationality McGee traced was between cultural independence versus openness to the world. In a speech titled *The Mental Outfit of the New Dominion*, McGee outlined what he called Canadians’ “mental common stock,” stating that “our mental self-reliance is an essential condition of our political independence” (Montreal *Gazette*, November 5, 1867.) This didn’t mean either nativist pride or a “merely imitative apish civilization” (ibid.). Instead, he called for “a mental condition, thoughtful and true; national in its preferences, but catholic in its sympathies; gravitating inward, not outward; ready to learn from every other people on one sole condition, that the lesson when learned, has been worth acquiring” (ibid.). He warned that nationalism, while a welcome spur to Canadian life, could shade into exclusivity, bitterness and bigotry, and called on Canadians to neither accept nor reject anything, “merely because it comes out of an older, or righter, or greater country” (ibid.). McGee’s reflections on Canada’s national identity are an attractive, early vision of a Canada that welcomed new ideas, and aspired to greatness:

All we have to do, is, each for himself, to keep down dissensions which can only weaken, impoverish, and keep back the country; each for himself do all he can to increase its wealth,

its strength, and its reputation; each for himself – you and you, gentlemen, and all of us – to welcome every talent, to hail every invention, to cherish every gem of art, to foster every gleam of authorship, to honour every acquirement and every natural gift, to lift ourselves to the level of our destinies, to rise above all low limitations and narrow circumscriptions, to cultivate that true catholicity of spirit which embraces all creeds, all classes, and all races, in order to make of our boundless Province, so rich in known and unknown resources, a great new Northern nation (McGee 1865b, 36–37).

Overcoming ethnic and religious prejudice

Like Cartier, McGee consistently condemned the ethnic and religious prejudice that threatened to make the Canadian national project impossible. He believed there was “nothing to be more dreaded in this country than feuds arising from exaggerated feelings of religion and nationality” (ibid., 6). He urged Canadians to “brand the propagandist of bigotry as the most dangerous of our enemies, because his work is to divide us among ourselves, and thereby render us incapable of common defence” (ibid., 34). Civil and religious liberty he argued would promote an inclusive culture, tamping down prejudice and attracting new Canadians from around the world (ibid., 218). Moderation he considered was a *sine qua non* of Canadian nationhood, repeatedly calling for “the cultivation of a tolerant spirit on all the delicate controversies of race and religion” (ibid., 4). Special duties fell to politicians in Canada, he argued, never to exploit divisions for political gain, for fear of arousing dormant conflicts lying beneath the thin crust of civilization.

Going beyond any simple condemnation of prejudice, McGee identified the process of overcoming ethnic and religious prejudice as a permanent feature of Canadian nationhood. “The one thing needed for making Canada the happiest of homes,” argued McGee, “is to rub down all sharp angles, and to remove those asperities which divide our people on questions of origin and religious profession” (ibid., 6). He believed the constant force of living together would over time shape a more tolerant Canadian culture. In his words, Canadians at Confederation:

could say that in Canada religious bigotry was at a discount; and if they wished for illustration, he could point his finger and show where the bigot had withered on his stalk, and where once he had a great show of power and influence, now were ‘none so poor as do him reverence.’ Bigots of all kinds, Catholic as well as Protestant; bigots of all classes, on all sides; bigots of race, who believed that no good could come out of the Nazareth of any other origin but their own, – their day of small things – God knew how small – had passed for ever in Canada. Every man was willing to respect every other man’s convictions. We had, at least, reached that degree of self-government, and shown ourselves to be in the best sense civil and religious freemen, fit for self-government, by allowing every man of every creed and sect and race to manage his own affairs in his own way, and to wash his own dirty linen in his own backyard, so that it did not trouble the neighbours or disturb the peace of the community (ibid. 112).

Securing an eastern seaboard

McGee also played a central role promoting union in the Maritimes, and promoting the Maritimes within Canada. More than any other Canadian politician, McGee knew the east, travelling to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick several times, and organizing the “intercolonial excursion” of 1864, in which many Canadian politicians saw the region for the first time. Like Cartier, McGee emphasised the importance of securing an eastern seaboard for Canada. He rejoiced that Canadians were “about to recover one of our lost senses – the sense that comprehends the sea” (McGee 1865c, 10). “The Union of the Provinces restores us to the ocean,” he continued, “takes us back to the Atlantic, and launches us once more on the modern Mediterranean, the true central sea of the western world”

(*ibid.*) McGee told Maritimers Confederation was founded in common interests, even called for by nature itself. “Your destiny and ours, gentlemen, is as inseparable as are the waters which pour into the *Baie Chaleurs*,” declared McGee in St John, New Brunswick (McGee 1865b, 72–73).

“*The Union of the Provinces restores us to the ocean, takes us back to the Atlantic, and launches us once more on the modern Mediterranean, the true central sea of the western world.*”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

Mixed government and liberty

Of the design of the new Constitution, McGee was also an advocate of the theory of mixed government, and a strong believer that the parliamentary system was animated by ideals of liberty. Serious political thinkers through the ages have been gripped by the idea that stability and permanency is secured by balancing the interests within the state. McGee echoed the example of the British and American constitutions, and the arguments of thinkers from ancient times to present-day, including Polybius, Montesquieu, Blackstone and Burke. “No unmixed form of government can satisfy the wants of a free and intelligent people,” he declared. Liberty, he said, was “the saving salt which preserves the formation of the Government of a free state from one generation to another” (*ibid.*, 88). We built on the “old foundations” (*ibid.*, 131) of the British Constitution, said McGee, but animated by the “electrical stimulus” of the *Magna Carta* and the Bill of Rights – the idea that maintains that wherever there is a Parliament, citizens have rights. (*ibid.*, 111). “It is natural for a larger liberty to flourish in these new regions,” McGee declared, “the new-found forest gave way for freedom but not for privilege” (*ibid.*, 84).

Stand against extremism: the clash with the Fenians

Finally, McGee’s stand against extremism was elevated to a tenet of Canadian nationhood by his clash with the Fenian brotherhood. American-based Fenians, together with Canadian Fenian sympathizers, hoped to free Ireland from British domination by disrupting British power in Canada. Forces crossed the border in 1866 with raids on Niagara, Campobello Island in New Brunswick, and Saint Armand in Quebec. It was Canadian-Fenian fifth columnists, operating in the shadows of the Irish community, that McGee most deplored. “I consider it the part of true patriotism not to jeopardize the position of the Irish in these British Provinces,” he warned (*ibid.*, 142). He urged the Canadian Irish to insulate themselves: “Establish at once, for your own sakes – for the country’s sake – a cordon sanitaire around your people . . . weed out and cast off those rotten members who, without a single governmental grievance to complain of in Canada, would yet weaken and divide us in these days of danger and anxiety” (*ibid.*, 145–146). As David Wilson argues, the intensity of McGee’s reaction was rooted in his past as a militant member of the Young Ireland movement: McGee was effectively “trying to exorcize the Fenian within himself” (Wilson, 2008, pp. 44–45). Yet McGee’s attempts to put down Fenianism are also the original model of any Canadian community leader trying to put down extremism linked to overseas conflict. ◆◆◆

The Confederation Debates: “We Dreamed a Dream of Union”

When McGee’s turn came in the Confederation Debates, it was his moment to sum up a 10-year campaign for Canadian unity, the dream of his life, the founding of a new Canadian nation. Like Cartier, McGee began his speech with a potted history of the Confederation movement, taking up one of his first essays in Canada, *A New Nationality*. Anti-Confederation Antoine-Aimé Dorion had referred to it as the source of the government’s throne speech commitment to found a new nation. McGee said he felt “some tingling of parental pride,” though he hastened to point out that the attempt to claim parentage of the idea was “absurd and futile” (*Confederation Debates*, 126). The idea had “floated through the minds of many men,” said McGee, as if two men had the same thought, only Shakespeare had thought of it first. He teased Dorion: “My honourable friend is in this respect, no doubt, the Shakespeare of the new nationality” (*ibid.*). The House laughed at this, the first of many times in the course of McGee’s address. Canada was born with the sound of laughter in the air.

“A fire that would ultimately light up the whole political horizon, and herald the dawn of a better day of a better day for our country and our people.”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

The power of ideas to inspire action

Tracing the history of the idea of Confederation, McGee pointed out that when Canada “had a place among the nations of the world,” those who fostered the dream in its early days would “deserve to be honourably mentioned.” Richard John Uniacke of Nova Scotia, Chief Justice John Beverley Robinson, even Lord Durham, McGee credited as advocates of union. As ever, McGee pointed out the power of ideas to inspire action: “If we have dreamed a dream of union (as some hon. Gentlemen say), it is at least worth while remarking that a dream which has been dreamed by such wise and good men, may, for aught we know or you know, have been a sort of vision – a vision foreshadowing forthcoming natural events with a clear intelligence. A vision (I say it without irreverence, for the event concerns the lives of millions living, and yet to come) resembling those seen by the Daniels and Josephs of old, foreshadowing the trials of the future; the fate of tribes and peoples; the rise and fall of dynasties” (*ibid.*)

Whatever the parentage of the idea, McGee said there was more than enough credit to share around. As recently as 1863, those who imagined it could be carried into effect by a coalition of Reformers and Conservatives would have been thought “half-daft,” and any in the Maritime Provinces who imagined a union conference with Canada would have been considered “equally demented.” It was futile to assign credit for an idea of such long germination: “it grew from an unnoticed feeble plant, to be a stately and flourishing tree, and for my part any one that pleases may say he made the tree grow, if I can only have hereafter my fair share of the shelter and the shade” (*Confederation Debates*, 127).

McGee credited Galt and Cartier’s “celebrated dispatch” of 1858 as giving the idea importance for the first time: “revived by the Constitutional Committee of last Session, which led to the Coalition, which led to the Quebec Conference, which led to the draft of the Constitution now on our table, which will lead, I am fain to believe, to the union of all these provinces” (ibid.)

Ideas mixed with events had been the genesis of Confederation, McGee argued. Whatever the “private writer in his closet may have conceived,” the great public had remained indifferent or unconvinced for a time. The dreamer had toiled almost, but not wholly, in vain: “for although his work may not have borne fruit then, it was kindling a fire that would ultimately light up the whole political horizon, and herald the dawn of a better day of a better day for our country and our people” (ibid.). A change in circumstances had been required to bring the idea bursting into life: “Events stronger than advocacy, events stronger than men, have come in at last like the fire behind the invisible writing to bring out the truth of these writings and to impress them upon the mind of every thoughtful man who has considered the position and probably future of these scattered provinces (Cheers.)” (ibid.).

The intellectual ingredients of a new nation

McGee congratulated the House and Canadians that the discussion of Confederation had elevated public discourse. It was as if “the provincial mind,” he said, “under the inspiration of a great question, leaped at a single bound out of the slough of mere mercenary struggles for office, and took post on the high and honourable ground from which alone this great subject can be taken in all its dimensions” (*Confederation Debates*, 128). The constitution, he said, had “given the people some sound mental food,” and gave a public man a subject worthy of his station, “no longer gnawing at a file and wasting his abilities in the poor effort of advancing the ends of some paltry faction or party” (ibid.) With the prospect of Confederation, we had already called into being “a mental union among the people of all these provinces; and many men now speak with a dignity and carefulness which formerly did not characterize them, when they were watched only by their own narrow and struggling section, and weighed only according to a stunted local standard” (ibid.) Taken together, we had the intellectual ingredients of a new nation: “we have the metal, the material, out of which to construct a new and vigorous nationality (Cheers.)” (ibid.).

Motives for Confederation – the “Three Warnings”

Next he addressed the motives for Confederation, calling them “mixed motives” of a political, social and military kind (ibid.). Canadians had had three warnings, said McGee, such that change was thrust upon them. First, there was a friendly warning from England that the imperial relationship was changing, and that Canadians would have to be more self-reliant and shoulder greater responsibility in defence. Second, there had been a warning from the United States, in the shape of the Civil War, the enormous growth in her armed forces, and the emergence of a warlike spirit, “that terrible change which has made war familiar and even attractive to them” (*Confederation Debates*, 130). “When the three cries among our next neighbours are money, taxation, blood, it is time for us to provide for our own security” (ibid., 131). Finally, there was the warning from within, argued McGee, pointing to Canada’s constitutional difficulties and political instability. These circumstances were Canada’s “three warnings,” pointing to the necessity of change. There must be no more “squandering of quarter centuries,” said McGee, or the moment of opportunity for union might slip away forever. “We are in the rapids, and must go on” (ibid., 134).

Aiming for the “possible best”

McGee then reviewed the obstacles that had stood in the way of Confederation for so long. The British government had told Canadians to “agree among yourselves,” said McGee, which was “easier

said than done” (ibid.). The emergence of the Coalition Government at the moment the Maritime Provinces had convened a conference for union amongst themselves he called “a providential concurrence of circumstances, the Coalition itself being an “extraordinary armistice of political warfare” (ibid., 135). After all this effort and sacrifice, argued McGee, the House must resist the temptation to let perfection be the enemy of the great. With a nod to Edmund Burke, McGee said we must aim at the “possible best,” or an “approximation to the right” (ibid., 136). He reinforced the point against perfection with a little joke at Christopher Dunkin’s expense, the member who in the course of the debate would make one of the greatest speeches against Confederation: “I admit, sir, as we have been told, that we ought to aim at perfection, but who has ever attained it, except perhaps the hon. Member for Brome. (Laughter)” (ibid.).

“Social advantages” of Union

McGee then dwelled on what he called the “social advantages” of a union of the provinces, mainly in terms of the new patriotism it would call into being. To French-Canadians, he pointed out Confederation would restore the integrity of the old lands of New France, and reunite the French-speaking minority communities with Lower Canada: “they will naturally look to you; their petitions will come to you, and their representatives will naturally be found allied with you . . . sure allies to your own compact body, to aid your legitimate influence in the Federal councils (Cheers.)” (ibid., 138). Other groups in the Maritime Provinces McGee acknowledged in turn. Newfoundland was an Irish colony, as was natural, being “the next parish to Ireland” (ibid.). There were the “thrifty” Germans of Lunenburg, with homes “the neatest in the land,” and fleet “the tightest on the sea” (ibid.). Large tracts of Prince Edward Island and Cape Breton were settled by the Highland Scots, said McGee, and still honoured faithfully the religion, language and traditions of their forefathers. Donald Macdonald, the member for Glengarry, would find his clansmen at Charlottetown, said McGee, to which Macdonald shot back, amid laughter, “they are all over the world.” “So much the better for the world,” said McGee (ibid.).

Then he traced the new patriotism that would be called into being by a union of the colonies, tamping down sentiments he had heard expressed among “exclusively-minded Canadians” who felt no affection for the other provinces. Join them together, and the rest would follow, urged McGee: “each will find something to like and respect in the other; mutual confidence and respect will follow, and a feeling of being engaged in a common cause for the good of a common nationality will grow up of itself without being forced by any man’s special advocacy” (ibid., 139). Those who could summon no such feeling, McGee condemned: “The thing who shuts up his heart against his kindred, his neighbours, and this fellow subjects, may be a very pretty fellow at a parish vestry, but do you call such a forked-radish as that, a man? (Laughter.) Don’t so abuse the noblest word in the language. (Hear, hear)” (ibid.). Yet he was careful also to trace the lines of loyalty many immigrant Canadians felt to other lands. Kept within just bounds, it was fine: there might be “divided affection,” but never “divided allegiance” (ibid.).

Parable of Canadian goodwill

As a member of the English-speaking minority of Quebec, McGee traced a parable of Canadian goodwill. There had been “a good deal of exaggeration on the subject of race, both on the one side and the other, in this section of the country,” said McGee. “This theory of race is sometimes carried to an anti-Christian and unphilosophical excess,” turning to the Bible to drive the point home: “Whose words are those – ‘God hath made of one blood all the nations that dwell on the face of the earth’? Is not that the true theory of race?” (*Confederation Debates*, 143). The “practical moral” was drawn by way of anecdote, relating that the first congregation of Presbyterians at Montreal had worshipped in the Roman Catholic Church of the Recollet Fathers. The Church annals recorded Protestant gratitude in the form

of a gift of candles and a hogshead of Spanish wine. McGee called this “true tolerance,” lightening his parable with characteristic humour: “Here, on the one hand, are the Recollet Fathers giving up one of their own churches to the disciples of John Knox to enable them to worship God after their own manner, and perhaps to have a gird at Popery in the meantime (great laughter) and here, on the other hand, are the grateful Presbyterians presenting to these same Seminary priests wine and wax tapers in acknowledgement of the use of their church, for Presbyterian service” (ibid., 144).

“Whose words are those – ‘God hath made of one blood all the nations that dwell on the face of the earth?’ ”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

Federation: a pillar of the new Canadian nationality

Finally, McGee turned to federation, as a pillar of the new Canadian nationality, and which he believed would tend to make Canada free. “There is something in the frequent, fond recurrence of mankind to this principle,” said McGee, “among the freest people, in their worst times and worst dangers, which leads me to believe, that it has a very deep hold in human nature itself – an excellent basis for a government to have” (ibid.). All governments were federations, to one degree or another, argued McGee, and federations favoured liberty, leaving local matters in the hands of those they concerned, free from interference by outsiders, but under the eyes of the “general supervision” of the wider whole, calling forth “a wise and true spirit of statesmanship” wherever it had been tried. Federation was the fulcrum of Canadian loyalties, McGee argued, the principle “so adapted as to promote internal peace and external security, and to call into action a genuine, enduring and heroic patriotism . . . capable of inspiring a noble ambition and a most salutary emulation” (ibid.).

Federation was the idea that would keep Canada together, declared McGee. More than a frontier, more than armies, stronger than any force, it was the idea of Canada that would keep the country together, and give its people something to fight for. What makes men fight, asked McGee: “For a line of scripture or chalk line – for a pretext or for a principle? What is a better boundary between nations than a parallel of latitude or even a natural obstacle?” Stronger than all of this was federation: “What really keeps nations intact and apart? – A principle. When I can hear our young men say as proudly, ‘our Federation’ or ‘our Country,’ or ‘our Kingdom,’ as the young men of other countries do, speaking of their own, then I shall have less apprehension for the result of whatever trials the future may have in store for us. (Cheers)” (ibid., 145).

No freer people “on the face of the earth”

Any free government aimed at liberty and permanency, said McGee, and here in Canada we had “liberty to our hearts’ content” (ibid., 146). This liberty McGee said ought to be balanced with constitutional authority, the sometime liberal showing his support for a mixed Constitution. There was no freer people “on the face of the earth” than the people of Canada, and our social condition was characterized by a large measure of democratic equality. Here we had “no aristocratic elements hallowed by time or bright deeds; here, every man is the first settler of the land, or removed from the first settler one or two generations at the furthest” (*Confederation Debates*, 146). This was “a new land,” declared McGee. “We have no aristocracy but of virtue and talent, which is the only true aristocracy, and is the old and true meaning of the term. (Hear, hear)” (ibid.).

A Constitution made by Canadians, for Canadians, to “perpetuate our freedom”

We had drafted a Constitution of our own making, framed with our own hands the house in which we were to live, he continued. The Constitution, said McGee, was “a scheme not suggested by others, or imposed upon us, but one the work of ourselves, the creation of our own intellect and of our own free, unbiased and untrammelled will” (ibid.). Yes, the imperial parliament would be asked to pass the final act, but it was done at Canadians’ request and for Canadian purposes, for protection against American encroachment, to provide the resources to develop our country, and to give us time to grow. To loud cheers, McGee concluded saying Canadian delegates to London should announce: “We of the British North American Provinces want to be joined together, that if danger comes, we can support each other in the day of trial. We come to your Majesty, who have given us liberty, to give us unity, that we may preserve and perpetuate our freedom” (ibid.). ♦◆

“We have no aristocracy but of virtue and talent, which is the only true aristocracy, and is the old and true meaning of the term.”

Thomas D’Arcy McGee

Ideals, Realities, and the Invention of Canada

“Good morning. It is morning now,” said McGee to the man bidding him goodnight. Three years after Confederation, in a night session of the House of Commons, McGee had just defended Charles Tupper, sent to England to fend off demands in Nova Scotia to repeal the Union. A true leader was prepared to “sacrifice himself,” McGee said, “not only to triumph with his principles, but even to suffer for his principles.”¹⁴ Confederation would win out in the fullness of time, with due regard shown to the rights of every province. “I, Sir, who have been, and still am, its warm and earnest advocate, speak here not as the representative of any Province, but as thoroughly and emphatically a Canadian, ready and bound to recognize the claims, if any, of my Canadian fellow subjects, from the farthest east, to the farthest west, equally as those of my nearest neighbour, or of the friend who proposed me on the hustings.”¹⁵ These were the last words of Thomas D’Arcy McGee to the Parliament of Canada, April 6, 1868. He stepped into the night, and into eternity, shot dead by a Fenian assassin on the doorstep of his Sparks Street lodgings in Ottawa. “Death is a gentleman, he seldom walks in unannounced,” McGee had said years before (McGee 1865b, 276).

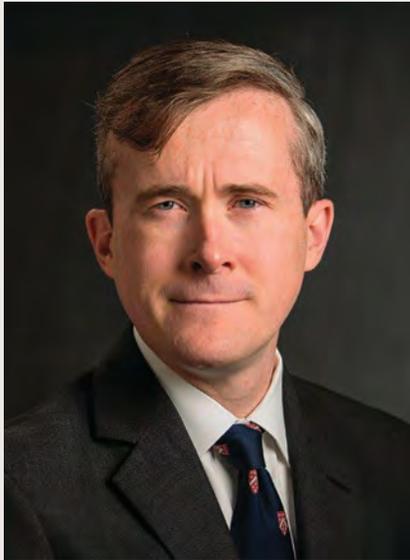
Cruel reality ended a life defined by the clash between ideal and reality. He had earned Fenian enmity with speeches laced with mockery of their cause, baiting his own assassins. Robin Burns, McGee’s biographer a generation prior to David Wilson, considered McGee’s life best explained as romance, his romantic conservatism a passing phase of 19th-century nationalism dead and gone (Burns, 1976,

p. 376). Wilson correctly argues Burns' romantic theme was "too neat," too marked by a "search for consistency," (Wilson, 2008, pp. 42–43) and instead consummately explores the tensions and contradictions in his subject. But the romantic conservatism Burns fixated on now seems misplaced. With conflicts of national origin, language and religion continuing to dominate global politics today, McGee's real romance was to imagine a country that overcame prejudice, and that was tolerant, just and free.

McGee's legacy to Canada is a recognizable image of ourselves, ideas and ideals that contributed to the invention of Canada. He was consummately a man attracted by ideas, the type who needed to believe in an ideal. Amidst the prejudice of his time – the "subterranean cisterns which drew up the draughts which made men mad" (*Scrapbook Debates*, July 21, 1858) – he imagined a Canada made stronger by its differences, which could show the world that different nationalities could live in peace together. McGee saw that Canada's national mission must be to extinguish national prejudices. He discerned trends and promoted ideas that would turn Canada into a nation of extreme moderates. "Whose words are those – 'God hath made of one blood all the nations that dwell on the face of the earth'?" A century and a half on, armed by the experience that complicates ideals, we should recognize that the greatest days of Canada still lie ahead, if only we can bring McGee's ideals to life. ♦



About the Author



Alastair Gillespie is a Canadian lawyer living in London, England. He is an associate in the London office of a large New York-based international law firm and his experience includes a broad array of corporate finance transactions. Alastair has also completed a secondment to a major investment banking institution. He is a Munk Senior Fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute.

Alastair has authored articles reporting on the founding speeches of five key Fathers of Confederation, published as a series by the *National Post* on occasion of the 150th anniversary of the constitutional debates held in the Legislature of Canada in 1865 prior to Confederation. The *National Post* also published Alastair's reflections on the life of Sir John A. Macdonald on the 200th anniversary of his birth.

Prior to his legal career, Alastair was Special Assistant to the Hon. A. Anne McLellan, Deputy Prime Minister of Canada and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

Alastair holds a B.A. in History from Yale University where he was a research assistant to Dr. Paul M. Kennedy, a member of Yale's Studies in Grand Strategy program and a rower on the Lightweight Crew. Alastair holds a B.C.L./LL.B. from the McGill University Faculty of Law where he was an Editor of the *McGill Law Journal*.

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Endnotes

- 1 *Mr. McGee's Address to the Catholic Public – More Especially to the Irish Catholics of Western Canada*, July 12, 1858.
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 McGee to Brown, November 4, 1859.
- 5 Quoted in Wilson 2011, 82–3.
- 6 Quoted in Wilson 2011, 83.
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 Quoted in Wilson 2011, 161–2.
- 9 *Hon. Mr. McGee's Speech at the Hustings*, 1863, 7.
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 See, e.g. “*Letter from D’Arcy McGee*,” *Toronto Globe*, June 19, 1863.
- 12 The *British American Magazine*, “*A Plea for British American Nationality*,” August, 1863, 338–345; and “*A Further Plea for British American Nationality*,” October 1863, 561–567.
- 13 *ibid.*, 565.
- 14 House of Commons, *Historic Debates*, April 6, 1868.
- 15 *ibid.*



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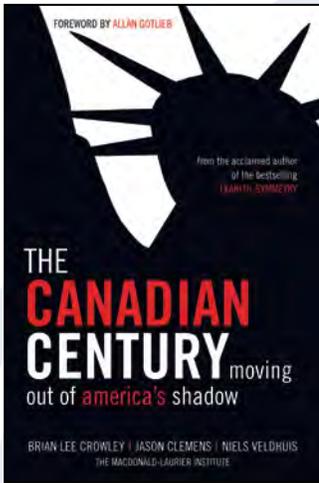
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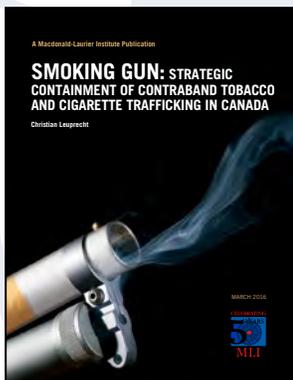
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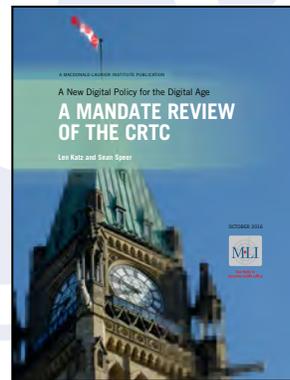
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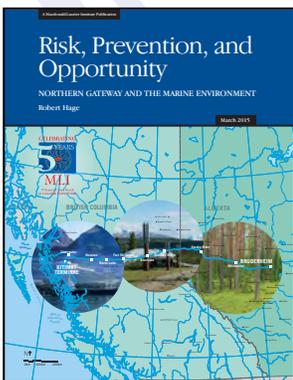
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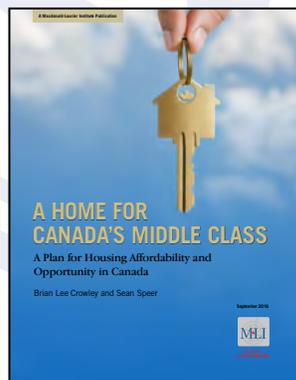
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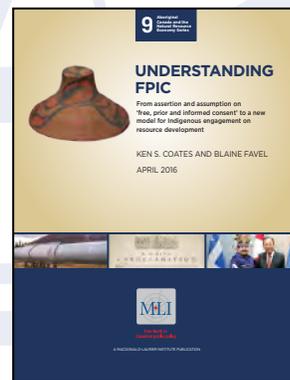
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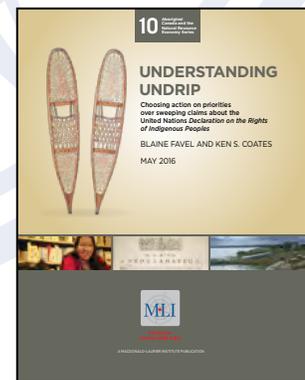
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