

Encounter with the Wolf

In March 1999 to mark the 50th anniversary of Confederation the Newfoundland Historical Society organized a symposium entitled "Encounters With the Wolf" (so called because of the anti-confederate song "Come near at your peril, Canadian Wolf!!). The panelists included participants in the negotiations leading to Confederation, academic experts, former politicians, writers, students and more than 300 interested observers. Confederation still raises strong emotions and debate in Newfoundland. Grace Sparkes is a former journalist, an opponent of Confederation and the first woman to run for a seat in the Newfoundland legislature following Confederation. Richard Cashin was a member of the House of Commons from 1962-1968. He was President of the Newfoundland Fisherman, Food and Allied Workers Union from 1969 to 1981. Mr. Cashin and Ms Sparkes were interviewed by Gary Levy in March 1999.

Can you characterize the political and economic situation in Newfoundland that led to the suspension of responsible government and what impact this had on the people?

Grace Sparkes: We went through the Great Depression like the rest of the world but the Newfoundland economy had always had its ups and downs. You could not always determine wealth or poverty the way you did in other places. For example, my father an out-port merchant owned fishing ships called "bankers" that went on several trips yearly to the Grand Banks in search of cod. Usually three bankers made up the yearly fleet. Each ship had a compliment of twenty-five men. Supplies for the men's families and the ships cost about thirty thousand dollars a season. Sometimes they came back with no fish which meant that the fishermen owed him money. He would forgive the debt and try to make it up the following year. Such

arrangements were common and as a result bank fishermen considered themselves as living in poverty.

The political situation was very bad. I think we were basically sold down the river by Britain. At the time information was hard to come by. Like many people I did not learn

that responsible government had been suspended until some time after the event. When I did hear the news I remember a sinking feeling which proved to be well founded.

The appointed Commission acted in a very high handed manner. They did not like criticism and



Grace Sparkes (right) with her daughter Doris.

Chronology of Events Leading to Newfoundland Joining Confederation

1933	British appoint Amulree Commission to study the political future of Newfoundland
February 16, 1934	Self Government suspended and Government by an Appointed Commission established to govern Newfoundland until it became economically self supporting and the people of Newfoundland requested a new form of government.
1939-1945	Second World War. Numerous American Military Bases established in Newfoundland.
June 1946	Election to choose 45 members of the National Convention to consider and discuss changes in the financial and economic situation and to make recommendations as to possible form of future government.
October 1946	Joey Smallwood's motion to have the Convention send delegates to Ottawa to discuss Confederation is defeated.
Feb 1947	Similar motion to send delegates to Ottawa is adopted and talks are held in Ottawa during the summer of 1947.
November 6, 1947	A draft of Terms of Union is presented to the Convention for discussion.
January 1948	The Convention decides to hold a referendum but a motion to include Confederation on the ballot is defeated by a vote of 29 to 16.
March 2, 1948	The British Government announces that a referendum will be held and that one of the options will be Confederation with Canada. The other options are continuation of Commission Government for five years, or a return to Responsible Government.
June 3, 1948	First referendum: Responsible Government 45%, Confederation 41%, Commission Government 14%.
July 22, 1948	Second referendum: Confederation 52%, Responsible Government 48%.
October 1948	Negotiations on the Final Terms of Union in Ottawa
December 11, 1948	Terms of Union signed
March 31, 1949	Newfoundland becomes the tenth Canadian province.

attempts to elicit information were met with blunt refusals. We were told it was not in our interest to know what was going on.

Richard Cashin: I came from a very political family. My uncle, Major Peter Cashin, and my father, were both keenly interested in politics so even though I was too young to participate in the pre-confederation debates I remember the era very well. I also studied it when I was at university.

There was definitely a sense of anger over what had happened. We became the only Dominion ever to voluntarily give up responsible government. The country was in danger of defaulting on its debts. The government had lost the confi-

dence of the people as a result of corruption and scandal.

There was a feeling that the loss of responsible government was a dirty deed done by outsiders. However, we have to look at this in the context of Newfoundland history. From the very beginning the Irish who settled Newfoundland were a tough, rowdy, independent lot strung out along the outports. They lacked a landed gentry as you found in Nova Scotia at this time and also had very little in the way of local government. Democratic institutions and values were lacking. Attempts over the years by Coker and others met with some success but the democratic reforms they promoted could

not survive the political upheaval caused by the Great Depression.

Was there a conspiracy to ensure that Newfoundland joined Canada?

Richard Cashin: Peter Cashin, one of the great orators in Newfoundland history, made this argument during the Convention. He was convinced of it and I suppose in a manner of speaking there was a series of events and circumstances that conspired to make Confederation with Canada almost inevitable. There was the Newfoundland debt. Britain was in the process of liquidating the Empire. Canadian businessmen had their eyes on resources in Labrador. There was a

certain inevitability of Union but I do not know if it was a "conspiracy" in the strict sense of the word.

Grace Sparkes: Peter Cashin's claim was absolutely right. I remember during the war we invited a high ranking member of the Canadian military to dinner and he astounded me when he asked. "How would you like to become Canadians". The way the Commission of Government was appointed, the way the Newfoundland delegation was rebuffed by Britain, the way the Confederation option was added to the ballot all point to a conspiracy. Individuals like Charlie Burchell who was Canada's Trade Commissioner worked behind the scenes to promote this option.

Was union with the United States an option?

Richard Cashin: I always thought "Economic Union", as it was called was a red herring. Some prominent people supported it including Ches Crosbie and young Don Jamieson but they never attracted more than a fringe following. The United States never engaged in negotiations with them since that would have been perceived as meddling in British affairs. This option only made sense if we first reverted to responsible government and then, somewhere down the road, decided to pursue union with the United States.

Grace Sparkes: I never really figured out what they wanted. I remember one meeting of the Responsible Government supporters when we invited Don Jamieson to share the platform with us. I took out my pen and decided to make notes on exactly what they were proposing. He was a gifted orator and he made a fine speech but when I looked at my notes there was nothing. He had spoken for nearly an hour and never said a single thing that explained this option.

I think the Economic Union movement consisted mainly of St. John's merchants who wanted to capitalize on the very pro American sentiment that prevailed at the time. The American military had made a tremendous contribution to the Newfoundland economy and the Americans were associated with prosperity.

What did you think about the referendum debate and the results?

Richard Cashin: When the second referendum went in favour of Confederation both my father and my uncle raised a pink and green flag as a sign of protest and mourning. Our family was anti-confederation but if we look at the reasons carefully we see that it was largely an issue of process.

Our dignity was diminished the way we entered Confederation. It would have been much better if we had got back our self government and then, perhaps, entered into negotiations with Canada as a fully self governing Dominion. I am not sure if the result would have been much different but we cannot dwell forever on mistakes that may have been made in the way the process unfolded.

Grace Sparkes: During the referendum campaigns I made numerous speeches against Confederation. I ghost wrote dozens of speeches for others. We travelled around the island and I remember many lively meetings. In some places the audiences did not really understand what was at stake. In other places they had been mesmerized by Joey Smallwood's talk of Canadian pensions and family allowances. The Confederation forces enjoy limitless funding. Every time we had a meeting there seemed to be an airplane flying overhead dropping pro confederation leaflets. Sometimes our meetings were drowned out by noisy demonstrations outside the

hall. Years later I met a man who told me that he had been paid \$5,000 to shut down one of our meetings.

Did the vote divide along religious, regional or class lines?

Richard Cashin: There were certainly religious factors. Irish Catholics were generally anti-Confederation and not just because the Arch Bishop took this position. The élites of St. John's both Protestant and Catholic were also anti-confederation. Those areas that were closer to Canada or who had more trade with Nova Scotia tended to be pro-confederation as were the outports. Women generally seemed largely in favor of Confederation.

When we look at the voting breakdown we have to remember that Smallwood was a populist. His message was not unlike the CCF of the time. The Bonavista Platform of the Fishermen's Protective Union pre-dated the Regina Manifesto. Smallwood modeled his program after the social democrats and his early program was very attractive to workers. Smallwood was also a great communicator and organizer. He took the message to people who felt isolated from St. John's.

Grace Sparkes: The Orangemen certainly worked in favour of Confederation. Roman Catholics and particularly the *Monitor* were generally opposed. It is true that many women favoured the idea of Confederation. I wondered sometimes how much they were influenced by the prospect of being able to buy duty free goods from the Eaton catalogue.

Was the first provincial election in 1949 somewhat of an anti-climax after the years of debate over joining Confederation?

Richard Cashin: The Confederation debate settled Newfoundland politics for a decade. The Liberals

under Smallwood came to power and the opposition, formed out of the Responsible Government forces, was unable to put together any coherent alternative. Peter Cashin was elected as an independent. In 1951 he took over the leadership of the Progressive Conservatives but was never able to defeat Smallwood. The defeat of the federal Liberals in 1957 led directly to another issue that sustained Smallwood in office. He tangled with John Diefenbaker over Article 29 of the Terms of Union.

Grace Sparkes: Once the referendum was lost there was little hope for the opposition. In my district, Burin, which was very pro-Confederation, it looked like there would not even be a candidate so I let my name stand. I described myself as a PC — a Protesting Canadian — but was defeated. I ran again in 1951 and also ran twice federally when the opposition was having difficulty finding a candidate. During one election campaign I was teaching and asked for a month's leave of absence to run in the election. Instead I got a letter terminating my services.

Was there an immediate change in the lives of Newfoundlanders as a result of Confederation?

Richard Cashin: I think the change was dramatic. Imagine, an entire new system of social welfare being implemented in one fell swoop. Everyone began receiving family allowance cheques, old age pension cheques, veteran benefits and so on. Newfoundland had its own social welfare system but the Canadian rates were much more generous. The outports which had existed in a kind of time warp without roads or electricity soon started to see changes. Memorial University was established and many other changes followed.

Grace Sparkes: Yes there certainly were changes. Virtually all our large industries collapsed. There used to be a Newfoundland clothing industry and Newfoundland foundries but with the coming of competition from Canada they collapsed and the jobs associated with them disappeared. We were flooded with goods and services from the mainland. Another change, which happened very slowly, is that we lost control of our resources including, of course, the fisheries.

How, in the light of history, would you describe the legacy of Joey Smallwood?

Richard Cashin: Joey Smallwood was a man with a vision. His vision was to unite Canada and Newfoundland. He behaved as men of vision sometimes do — energetically, stubbornly, dogmatically. He would have fit nicely into a revolutionary society like Argentina under the Peronistes. He also brought tremendous knowledge and skills to the task at hand which was to convince Newfoundlanders to accept his vision. Once he had accomplished this task for which he worked so long and so hard he turned to other projects and some of these were less successful. He may have stayed too long. He may have strayed from some of his original ideas, as far as unions were concerned for example. He may have neglected to nurture people to succeed him. These are not unusual faults for people with his character.

Grace Sparkes: When I think of Joey Smallwood I remember his ruthlessness and vindictiveness. He would use whatever means necessary to get what he wanted. If he found out that an adversary was in financial difficulty he would offer that person money or a job in exchange for support. If he could not win someone over he would

threaten and intimidate. I was a journalist in those days and I am sure that if he had the power he would have put me in jail for my criticism of his government. We called him "little Batista" after the Cuban dictator of the 1950s. On more than one occasion he wrote the editor of my newspaper and demanded that I be fired. Fortunately John Currie, owner of the *St. John's Daily News*, was not intimidated by these threats.

Could Newfoundland have gone it alone in 1949 or today?

Richard Cashin: One can only speculate about the past but I have never shared the romantic view that if only we had been left alone we would have developed an idyllic society free from many of the problems we face today. When people make this argument I try to remind them that lamenting Confederation seems part of our common heritage. The first Nova Scotia government opposed Confederation. Quebec governments have sought dissolution. At various times people in Alberta and British Columbia have come to the conclusion that they would be better off on their own. One cannot live in the past and one cannot live with a permanent sense of grievance. It is debilitating and keeps us from solving real problems that exist.

Grace Sparkes: During the Confederation debates I believed that if we joined Canada, Newfoundlanders would never again own the soil we walk upon. With strong leadership we may have had a chance to govern ourselves. I am now 91 years old and have yet to be convinced that I was wrong. I still keep an active interest in politics but I think the answer to this question really has to come from the younger generation.