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GEORGE BROWN AND THE MOTHER OF CONFEDERATION, 1864

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From my title one might assume that I was striving to fill a grave gap in our national genealogy on the ground that everybody needs a mother. Such is not my high purpose, however. I am simply utilizing a happy remark made by Frank Underhill in a paper he delivered to this association in 1927. Speaking of Brown's willingness to come to terms with his enemies in the cause of Confederation, in 1864, he observed that Brown's recent marriage had had a remarkably mellowing influence on the Galahad of Grittism: "Perhaps the real father of Confederation was Mrs. Brown."¹ I am merely altering the characterization to restore to Mrs. Brown her rightful sex.

Should I admit my title is devised to trap an audience? I do not really propose to prove that Brown's activities in the conceptual year of Confederation were directed by a feminine hand. What I do seek to show is that his public conduct was so much affected by his private concerns, centred in his wife and family, that the former cannot be properly described without reference to the latter. No doubt much the same is true of other men, not excluding Fathers of Confederation. All the more reason, then, to try to fill in every detail we can find on the day-by-day and personal existence of the chief participants in the Confederation movement, in order to bring our record closer to reality. And in George Brown's case, we have an ample source of information in the letters which he sent his wife Anne almost daily through long stretches of the year 1864, while he was engaged in the crucial political proceedings that led to Confederation. This paper will seek to trace his own share, as he himself portrayed it to his wife.

His letters, of course, can now be found in the Brown Papers at the Public Archives in Ottawa. A number of them have been more or less in print for years, in the selection of Brown's correspondence included by his first biographer, Alexander Mackenzie, in *The Life and Speeches of Hon. George Brown*, published in 1882. But in reproducing some of Brown's letters to his wife, Mackenzie as literary executor kept pretty closely to political comments, and

¹ F. H. Underhill, "Some Aspects of Upper Canadian Radical Opinion in the Decade before Confederation", *Canadian Historical Association Annual Report for 1927*, p. 59.

thus cut out a large part — and in many ways the best part — of the correspondence. The affectionate exchanges, the homely details and private small-talk were virtually eliminated in a gutting process that left the end-product about as flat and flabby as a filleted cod. On occasion, moreover, Mackenzie cut out or altered political references; and some of the letters that dealt with public as well as private affairs, he did not publish at all. Hence there is good cause to examine the original letters again, now they are available, without heed to the excerpts that Mackenzie put in print.

Brown had met Anne Nelson, daughter of the late William Nelson, the celebrated publisher, in Edinburgh in the autumn of 1862, while he was making his first return to his native land in twenty-five years. He had been out of parliament since his defeat in the general elections of 1861, and had not attempted to find another seat largely because of serious illness, which had also contributed to his defeat. At length, after a long and gloomy convalescence, he had decided to seek full recovery in a trip abroad; and in Britain, certainly, in the summer of 1862 his health and good spirits seemed rapidly restored. In London he encountered Thomas Nelson, an old school mate of Edinburgh High School days, and was invited to spend a week with the Nelson family in Edinburgh.² There, in the opulent but easy comfort of the Nelson home, Abden House, he met Anne, one of the lively and attractive Nelson sisters.

She was a strong-minded, intelligent and cultivated young woman, who had not only made the necessary grand tours of Europe but had lived and studied extensively in Germany. Neither a blue-stocking nor the semi-mythical Victorian shrinking violet, she knew what she wanted and saw what she liked in the forty-two year old publisher and politician from Canada. George Brown himself, like many another so-called settled bachelor, fell suddenly and sweepingly in love. He stayed on in Edinburgh, he went to the island of Arran with Anne and the family, and early in October their forthcoming marriage was announced. They were married at Abden House late in November, were well established in Toronto before 1863 began.

It was a properly blissful yet no less busy first year. George was proudly displaying his bride in Toronto society, showing her his beloved country estate, Bothwell, in the far south-west of Upper Canada, taking her to Montreal to stay with his old friend and political associate, Luther Holton, and his wife — and aside from all this, re-entering politics himself. He agreed to stand in a by-election

² Thomas Nelson to Anne Nelson, August 11, 1862. Though found among George Brown's papers, this letter remains with others pertaining to the Nelsons in the possession of the present Brown family at Ichrahan House, Taynuilt, Argyll. All other references to Brown Papers in this article are to those deposited at the Public Archives of Canada.

in South Oxford in March, and won handily. He won another campaign for the seat that summer, in the general elections that were called by the weak Sandfield Macdonald Reform government in an attempt to strengthen its position. But though the government made gains in Upper Canada, it lost in Lower Canada, and if anything, was in worse state than before. The ministry dragged uneasily over the end of 1863 and into 1864, with little hope of more than bare survival. The forces of Macdonald and Cartier, strong in the east, virtually balanced those of the Reformers, strong in the west. The course of politics was set straight to utter deadlock, as the session of 1864 neared. Yet George Brown seemed singularly unconcerned. He had a first child born to him, a daughter, Margaret, in January of 1864. His life was revolving about his wife and home. He could hardly drag himself away from Anne and baby Maggie as parliament opened at Quebec on February 19.

During the opening debates he was writing Anne from his seat in the House, "Already I long to be back with you and will grudge every day I am kept from your side . . . Don't fail to write me every day if only a single line to say that you and Maggie are well. Tell me all about your doings and baby's — the smallest incident will be anxiously perused".³ His whole view of politics seemed markedly detached. Undoubtedly this was a different George Brown from the vehement sectional leader of the 1850's. Perhaps the sobering effects of parliamentary defeat and exhausting illness, a new perspective from his British visit, after long years in the confines of a colony — and surely the marriage that had given a new breadth and focus to his life — had all combined to make the change in Brown.

His letters to Anne from first re-entering politics the year before had indicated that he largely did so from a sense of duty and a sense of business yet unfinished. Assuredly in his mind Upper Canada still had to be freed from grave injustice, from sectional domination; the constitutional problem of the Canadian union still had to be settled, whether through 'Rep by Pop' or a federation of the two Canadas. Yet he was not the party leader, and did not seek to be; nor was there the old bubbling optimism, impetuosity, and indeed, impatience. His only impatience was with politics itself, that kept him from his wife and family: "I hate this parliamentary work . . . I think what a fool I am to be here."⁴

At the beginning of his by-election campaign in South Oxford he had told Anne, "I find a wonderful change in my feelings about all this since the olden time. I am persuaded that had I stayed out of it for a year longer I would never have returned — and I would

³ Brown Papers, George Brown to Anne Brown, February 22, 1864.

⁴ *Ibid.*, February 29, 1864.

have been right".⁵ And it was rather unlike the old Brown when he informed her, "It is very pleasant to find how kind everyone is to me—even those who are going strongest against me—not a harsh word".⁶ From Quebec, moreover, he wrote to Anne's mother, "I am half sorry I came back to parliament and yet it would have been difficult for my political friends to get along without me under present circumstances. Anne says, however, I am not to run again, and as I always do as she tells me, I suppose this parliamentary life will not trouble us long".⁷

His position in the assembly was not much less detached than his state of mind. He felt little confidence in Sandfield Macdonald personally, or in his ministry—which did not intend to tackle the constitutional question. Even when the government was reconstructed more to his liking, with his old friend Dorion as co-premier, Brown saw it as far too weak, far too concerned with mere survival, to be able to do anything positive. Accordingly, outside the cabinet as he was, but with a name that still carried great prestige among Grit Liberals of the West, he began to chart a broadly independent line of policy, seeking in a resolution, free from partisan tone, to establish a select committee that would examine the constitutional question in its own right, and not as a party issue. Otherwise, his letters exhibited little interest over parliamentary matters and manoeuvres, only a desire to see them all wound up so that he could get home. He was not even in the assembly for some of the most violent clashes. He wrote to Anne on February 25, "There was an awful scene of abuse in the House last night, McGee, O'Halloran, Ferguson and others pitching into each other like fury. Fortunately I stayed home to nurse my leg [he suffered from sciatica], played a couple of games of chess with John Macdonald and went off to bed at one o'clock. . . . The debates so far have not had one hour's common sense in them. . . . There ought to be a shake up and I hope there will be".

Not that he had any personal ambitions in this regard. He wrote: "Gordon [his brother] is entirely wrong in fancying that I would for a moment entertain the idea of 'going in'. Lots of people here talk of that, but nothing would tempt me to commit such an act of folly. No, my Anne, we will pay off all our debts, have two or three years quiet enjoyment with our little pet, lessen our labour—and then *perhaps* think of such work. But now—it would be arrant folly. At any time, it would be—well I won't moralize. But you are so ambitious!"⁸

⁵ *Ibid.*, February 26, 1863.

⁶ *Ibid.*, February 28 (?), 1863.

⁷ *Ibid.*, George Brown to Mrs. Nelson, October 2, 1863.

⁸ *Ibid.*, George Brown to Anne Brown, February 27, 1864.

He turned to another subject, dear to both their hearts: a projected holiday in Scotland that coming summer. Anne had been diffident in raising the subject, and George responded, “‘if we should go home in [the] summer’ . . . I can fancy the half-pleasure, half-sadness with which that ‘if’ was written. I believe Anne, you are the best wife that ever lived. You think it will be inconvenient for me to cross the herring pond this summer — and you are constantly saying kind little things to make it easy for me to say so. But Madam, you may as well make up your mind to the fact at once. There are others concerned besides you and me and Baby. Our words are pledged to go, and go we shall. . . . I would say this whatever business detentions were in the way — but really there never was a time when so little was in the way”.⁹

The partisan debates he had once entered with such zest he now found merely boring. “Rose”, he said, “has just risen to speak and he has said the only sensible thing that has yet been uttered . . . He hoped that the debate would now be brought to a close without further waste of time — and that we may get to the business of the country”. As for Cartier, “Would you believe it . . . the little wretch screeched — is that the way to spell it? — thirteen hours in one speech! They use to charge me with being long-winded — but Cartier outdoes all the world, past, present or to come”.¹⁰ He also sent along a photograph received from a former political ally, D’Arcy McGee, who now sat on the other side of the House. “I enclose you a carte of D’Arcy McGee, and think you will say that he never looked so well in his life. It was a great thing in him to give it to me — but I believe he does not think me quite as bad as the rest of the ministerial party — but rather as a redeeming point.”¹¹

He stayed quietly by himself as much as possible, often in his lodgings, waiting for his wife’s letters. “Near three o’clock and Anne’s letter not come! That horrid Grand Trunk. For the last two hours every foot on the stairs has made my heart beat a little faster — there come my letters — but it always goes past and I go to work again. Perhaps you won’t believe it, but I am very industrious these days. Never go out till the house meets and work like a beaver at letters and all sorts of things. I have a very comfortable room, indeed, with a glorious view of the St. Charles, and I read a little, write a good deal, look out a little and think and muse of darling Anne and our little Baby all the while. You won’t be vexed if I confess that I am not a bit unhappy — separated though we are?”¹²

⁹ *Ibid.*, February 29, 1864. All following references are to 1864.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, March 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, March 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, March 4.

In the House, his chief efforts were being spent in the committee rooms. "I am working very hard — something like old times. They have put me on all the leading committees — on eleven I think — and I expect to do some good work upon them. The members (even the French) are all very kind and civil to me this session — particularly so — and I find it very pleasant."¹³

On March 14 he was finally able to move his resolution for a select committee to inquire into the constitutional question. "I was delivered from my responsibility on the Representation question last night — having spoken out my whole mind on the subject. I spoke for once an hour and kept the rapt attention of the house the whole time. What I said seems to have satisfied my own friends very well . . . The opposition took a wretched course in the debate. Galt, Cartier and John A. throwing aside entirely the importance of the subject, attempted to turn it off on miserable personal questions of inconsistency — John A. was especially mean and contemptible. He attacked Mowat and myself very bitterly — but I think he got it back with interest . . . I don't think we will carry the committee but we will have at any rate a very large vote upon it — and if we don't get the committee we will bring up the question in several different shapes."¹⁴

He did not get the chance immediately. After hopeless efforts at reconstruction, the Sandfield Macdonald ministry resigned on March 21. Parliament was adjourned; the composition of a Liberal-Conservative ministry under Taché and John A. Macdonald was announced by the end of the month. By-elections followed, and the session did not reopen until May 3 — although Brown himself did not arrive back in Quebec till May 11, having stretched out his Toronto visit as long as he could.

One thing had been decided during the recess: he would not accompany his wife to Scotland, but would follow later, for the political situation had not yet sorted itself out and showed small signs of doing so. In Quebec, he found "the party in an uproar — dissatisfied with the conduct of the leading men and urgent for a test vote".¹⁵ To all intents, the Reform rank and file had turned against Sandfield Macdonald and his former ministers. The party was virtually leaderless. Brown himself was not in favour of a direct test of confidence, but the party caucus had already determined to seek it before he arrived. "It may possibly come on tonight", he told his wife on May 13, "and if so you will have the results before this reaches you. Whatever it is, we are pretty certain to have a general election this year — and then to be done with parliamentary life!"

¹³ *Ibid.*, March 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, March 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, May 13.

The test was tried. On May 16, he reported, "our vote of want of confidence has commenced and will be continued tonight. What the results may be is still uncertain, but I expect we will be beaten by from one to three votes. Things here are very unsatisfactory. No one sees his way out of the mess — and there is no way but my way — 'rep by pop'. There is great talk today of a coalition — and what do you think? Why, that in order to make the coalition successful the Imperial Government are to offer me the governorship of one of the British colonies! I have been gravely asked today by several if it is true that I have been offered it and whether I would accept! What do *you* say, Madam, will you condescend to be 'Her Excellency the Governess of the Windward Islands, or of the Province of British Columbia?' My reply was, and I think my Anne will endorse it, that I would rather be proprietor of the *Globe* newspaper for a few years than the Governor-General of Canada, much less a trumpery little province. But I need hardly tell you the thing has no foundation . . ." Nonetheless talk of coalition was in air, and openly being voiced in parliament.

The want of confidence debate dragged on, and before it ended, Brown at last carried his motion for a committee to investigate the constitutional problem. On May 18 he noted, "I brought on my motion for constitutional changes this afternoon and we had a capital debate upon it. The best debate on the question we ever had in parliament, calm, temperate and to the point. . . . I feel a very great desire to carry my motion. I would give a good large sum to carry it. It would be the first vote ever carried in parliament in favour of constitutional change, and even that would be some satisfaction after my long fight for it". Then on May 20 he could gleefully tell Anne, "it was indeed a great success and took Cartier, McDonald [*sic*] and Co. by intense surprise. They had no conception that there was a probability of my motion being carried. . . . my committee had its first meeting at noon today. Sixteen members of the Committee were present — and we had a very useful and harmonious discussion".

While this weighty committee of leading men on both sides deliberated — and while the Conservative ministry survived the want of confidence test by a one-vote margin — Brown himself was as much concerned with plans for getting Anne away. There was so many last-minute details to attend to, to write about. On May 25 he left Quebec for Toronto, to take his wife and child to the steamer at New York. A few days later they went down to stay at the Astor House, until, on June 1, Anne sailed. She was travelling with George's brother, Gordon, whose own state of health required him to take a sea voyage. George and Gordon's wife, Sarah, saw them off, and returned to Toronto together. "We got safely ensconced in a sleeping car", George wrote in the first letter he sent across the ocean, "and were soon

sweeping along the Banks of the Hudson northwards". The setting was entrancing in the soft summer night — "but for the wandering of our thoughts seaward..."¹⁶ Still, he estimated hopefully, "the session will not likely last more than ten days".¹⁷

What he found, however, when he returned to parliament in Quebec made him change his estimate. "There is no prospect of an immediate termination to the session", he now declared, "It will probably not close before two or three weeks. Ministers are very weak and dare hardly make a motion — but there is an unwillingness among the opposition to push things to extremities..."¹⁸ He found time to take Mrs. Mowat off to a grand concert in the music hall, since Oliver Mowat was ill with a sore throat. "If you had only seen the crop of glasses directed at us when we took our seats, from Madam Duval downward!"¹⁹

But as he busied himself again with his constitutional committee, the climax was at last approaching. "Cartier announced on Saturday", he wrote on June 13, "that the government desired to bring the session to an end that day week — but the thing cannot be done. An effort is to be made to defeat them tomorrow night and if Dunkin comes up to the mark it will be successful... If the government is beaten tomorrow night no one can tell how long the session may last."²⁰

It was beaten. On June 14 the Cartier-Macdonald ministry was defeated by a margin of two votes. Another government had fallen, though with small hope for a successor. Yet, just a few hours before, on that very day, Brown's all-important committee had reported — and reported "a strong feeling among members of the committee in favour of changes in the direction of a federated system applied either to Canada alone or to the whole British North American provinces".²¹ Twelve committee members stood behind the report: only three rejected it. This was the key to solution — evidence that leading men on both sides of the House could agree on a remedy to the constitutional problem: men like Cartier, Galt, McGee, Chapais, Mowat and Holton. Of the leaders, only the Macdonalds, John Alexander and John Sandfield, had signed the report in the negative.

The rapid and momentous succession of events that followed is too well known to need detailed examination here. Sufficient is George Brown's hurried synopsis to his wife (drafted at one o'clock in the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, June 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, June 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, June 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, June 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *The Globe* (Toronto), June 15.

morning on June 18 by "your own sleepy husband"): "On Tuesday we defeated the government by a majority of two. They asked the Governor-General to dissolve parliament and he consented. But before acting on it, at the Governor's suggestion, they applied to me to aid them in reconstructing the government — *on the basis of settling the constitutional difficulties between Upper and Lower Canada*. I refused to accept office but agreed to help them earnestly and sincerely in the matter they proposed. Negotiations were thereupon commenced and are still going on with considerable hope of finding a satisfactory solution of our troubles. The facts were announced to the House today by John A. Macdonald amidst tremendous cheering from both sides of the House. You never saw such a scene . . . But as the whole thing may fail — we will not count our chickens just yet."

On the 20th, he sent another hasty note, scribbled as he sat waiting in the Governor-General's office for Lord Monck, and promising a longer letter if he could get away in time to catch the steamer mail for England. "If he is short I will write you. If he is long-winded I will not be able to do so. But meantime I may say that I have closed the negotiations for the construction of a new government pledged to carry constitutional changes — and I have the offer of office for myself and two others to be named by me. I call a meeting of the party tonight to accept or reject this offer — and I must abide by its determinations. I am deeply distressed at having this matter thrust upon me now — but dare not refuse the responsibility with such vast interests at stake. How I do wish you were here to advise me. You cannot tell how I wish you had been. But never mind, I will try to do my duty to the country in such a manner as you, my dearest Anne, will not be ashamed of."

The next day, the 21st, the Upper Canadian Liberals insisted that Brown should enter the government himself. "You will see from the published proceedings", he told Anne earnestly, "... that my course was sustained almost unanimously. You will see that the meeting passed a resolution urging me to go into the government — but that did not influence me much. Private letters from many quarters did far more. And the extreme urgency of the Governor-General did still more. His Excellency sent a very kind letter urging me to go in, of which I will send you a copy by the Cunard Boat. The thing that finally determined me was the fact ascertained by Mowat and myself, that unless we went in the whole effort for constitutional changes would break down. . . . We consented with great reluctance — but there was no help for it — and it was such a temptation to have possibly the power of settling the sectional troubles of Canada for ever!"²²

²² Brown Papers, George Brown to Anne Brown, June 23.

"It is great fun", he added brightly, "the unanimity of sentiment is without example in this wooden country".²³ The session was quickly wound up. The weather was "fearfully hot" now, and members were already trooping from Quebec. On June 30 parliament was prorogued, and immediately following George Brown and his Reform associates, Mowat and McDougall, were sworn in as ministers of the Crown. Then he departed for Toronto to prepare for the by-election campaign that now awaited him in South Oxford. Within a week it was in full swing.

His sweep around his constituency was almost a triumphal progress. He was returned by acclamation in mid-July, and thereafter went on to Bothwell, presumably both to examine the progress of the crops and to have a rest. Then he came back to Toronto to arrange for the move from Church Street to a new home on Wellington, where they were to take up residence on their return from Scotland. There was new furniture to contract for, wallpaper and hangings, and a whole host of decorating details that Anne had partially commissioned before she left, and which George was to see carried out. As he solemnly affirmed, "... we *must* think of wallpaper and carpets, whatever comes of the constitution".²⁴ He sent her details of the furniture ordered from Jacques and Hay for the drawing room — "the whole of black walnut — and to match and got up in the best style... Before I leave I will order the painting and papering — so unless you speak soon you may be put to shame by my horrid bad taste".²⁵ As he saw things now he should be able to leave to join Anne early in the autumn. He was to go on to the Maritimes in the cause of federal union at the end of August, following cabinet discussions in Quebec. "The convention of provincial delegates is to be held at Charlottetown on the 1st Sept. and I will either leave immediately after that or return to Quebec and here first and then leave for England in October."²⁶

On returning to Quebec in early August he was caught up in a round of cabinet meetings, as plans were readied for the coming discussions of British North American union in the Lower Provinces. Things went on rather smoothly, he was glad to relate, and prospects were most hopeful. "I am happy to tell you that all fear of our compact not being carried out in good faith has now pretty well passed from my mind, and I now feel very confident that we will satisfactorily and harmoniously accomplish our great purpose. Taché, Cartier and their colleagues have behaved very well and showed no inclination to swerve from their bargain."²⁷ It was also notable that

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, July 28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, August 8.

he was getting on quite amiably with John A. Macdonald, his ancient enemy. They had the month before, in fact, gone together to campaign on McDougall's behalf in his by-election in North Oxford. He now could write casually to Anne of a Governor-General's party: "John A. and I were the only civilians — we had great fun."²⁸

But relations between old opponents could not always run on smoothly. Indeed, on the very eve of the Canadian expedition to Charlottetown the great coalition almost fell apart. The story is best told in Brown's own words in his letter of August 28.

"Do you know you were very near being stripped yesterday of your honours of Presidentess of the Council? Would not that have been a sad affair? It was in this way. The council was summoned for twelve and shortly after that we were all assembled but John A. We waited for him till one — till half past one — till two — and then Galt sent off to his house specially for him. Answer — will be here immediately. Waited till half past two — no appearance, waited till three and shortly after, John A. entered bearing symptoms of having been on a spree. He was half drunk. Lunch is always on the side table and he soon applied himself to it — and before we had well entered on the important business before us he was quite drunk with potations of ale. After two hours and a half debate we closed the important discussions of three days on the constitutional changes and arranged finally all about our trip to Charlottetown and our course when there. John A. then declared he had an important matter to bring before us — the dispute with the Ottawa building contractors. You should know that the original *contract* for these buildings was \$700,000 — but when the Liberal party got into power they found that \$1,200,000 had been spent — and \$550,000 was claimed to be owing — but the works were not with all this half finished! The government in consequence stopped the buildings and appointed commissioners to investigate the whole matter. They disclosed the most astounding folly and fraud in the business from beginning to end — and reported that instead of \$550,000 being due to the contractors they were already over paid, and there the matter has stood ever since — nearly three years."

Now that Macdonald was back in power, Brown said, his friends, the contractors, were making a new attempt to secure their claim. "I was quite willing to send this thing to arbitration — but determined that men only of the highest character and position should be entrusted with it." Macdonald proposed to appoint three men, two of them unknown to Brown.

"I asked that the matter should be delayed until I made inquiries — John A. would not hear of delay and insisted loudly, fiercely, that

²⁸ *Ibid.*

the thing should be settled then and there. His old friends in the Cabinet saw of course that he was quite wrong — but they feared to offend him and pressed for a settlement. Matters came to a point. He declared that if the thing was done then I would not sit in the council one moment longer. Mowat stood firmly by me and McDougall partly — moderately. Galt got alarmed and proposed a mode which in effect postponed the matter till Monday. I agreed to it and the council all but John A. adopted it. It was declared carried. Thereupon John A. burst out furiously declaring that his friends had deserted him and he would not hold office another day. The council adjourned in great confusion — John A's friends trying to appease him... I don't imagine for a moment that... [these appointments] will be pressed. It will be utterly ruinous to John A. if the whole affair goes before the public. He will not think of it when he gets sober. To say the truth, were our visit to the Lower Provinces and to England once over, I would not care how soon a rupture came. The constitutional question would then be beyond all chance of failure — and I would be quit of company that is far from agreeable."

Here is a foreshadowing — and perhaps a partial explanation — of George Brown's actual withdrawal from the government at the end of the following year. At the time of his writing, however, the breach was successfully closed. He told his wife, "I have written all this for your eye alone. . . . there can be secrets of no kind between Anne and me".²⁹ And then he was off by the government steamer *Queen Victoria* to "that queer place Charlottetown".³⁰

It was a pleasant cruise down, as Brown described it (this, incidently, in another long and most valuable letter to Anne completely missing from Alexander Mackenzie's collection).³¹ The weather was fine, the ship comfortable; the company proved agreeable. There was "a broad awning to recline under, excellent stores of all kinds, an unexceptionable cook, lots of books, chess boards, backgammon and so forth".³² Brown was up at four on the morning that they reached Charlottetown, to see the sun rise and have a salt water bath. "We had just reached the northerly point of Prince Edward and were running along the coast of the prettiest country you ever put your eye upon."³³ About noon, "amid most beautiful scenery, we came suddenly upon the capital city of the island. Our steamer

²⁹ *Ibid.*, August 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, August 29.

³¹ *Ibid.*, September 13. (Compare this long letter on the Charlottetown Conference with the account, largely based on newspapers, in W. M. Whitelaw, *The Maritimes and Canada before Confederation*, pp. 220-226. See also D. G. Creighton, *John A. Macdonald, The Young Politician*, pp. 363-368.)

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

dropped anchor magnificently in the stream and its man-of-war cut evidently inspired the natives with huge respect for their big brothers from Canada. I flatter myself we did that well. Having dressed ourselves in correct style, our two boats were lowered man-of-war fashion, and being each duly manned with four oarsmen and a boatswain dressed in blue uniforms, hats belts, etc. in regular style, we pulled away for shore and landed like Mr. Christopher Columbus, who had the precedence of us in taking possession of portions of the American continent".³⁴

The Maritime delegates were already on hand and the Canadians, of course, came merely as unofficial visitors. "The conference was accordingly organized without us. With that being done, we were formally invited to be present . . . Having gone through the shake elbow and the how-do-you-do and the fine weather — the conference adjourned until the next morning at ten, then to meet for the serious dispatch of business."³⁵ That evening, Governor Dundas gave a large dinner party. Brown enjoyed it, and found Dundas "a very nice fellow".³⁶ He himself stayed with Pope, the Provincial Secretary, and his wife — not to mention "a large family of strong, vigorous, intelligent and good-looking children — eight of them, all steps and stairs, kicking up a precious row occasionally".³⁷

The next day, Friday, September 2, they met in conference. "Canada", said Brown, "opened her batteries", as John A. and Cartier set forth the general arguments in favour of Confederation. There followed a grand buffet supper, courtesy of Mr. Pope. "This killed the day and we spent the beautiful moonlight evening in walking, driving or boating as the mood was on us. I sat on Mr. Pope's balcony looking over the sea in all its glory."³⁸

The following morning Galt discoursed to the conference on the financial aspects of British North American federal union; and then it was the Canadians' turn to entertain the delegates at luncheon on board the steamer, in what Brown termed "princely style". "Cartier and I made eloquent speeches — of course — and whether as a result of our eloquence or of the goodness of our champagne, the ice became completely broken, the tongues of the delegates wagged merrily and the bans of matrimony between all the Provinces of British North America having been formally proclaimed and all manner of persons duly warned then, there and then to speak or forever after hold their tongues — no man appeared to forbid the bans and the union was therefore formally completed and proclaimed!"³⁹

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.* (Compare Whitelaw, p. 221.)

³⁹ *Ibid.* (Compare Whitelaw, p. 222.)

It was Brown's turn on Monday to address the conference. He took the whole session, talking of the constitutional aspects of a federal union, "the manner in which the several governments, general and local, should be constructed, how the judiciary should be constituted, what duty should be prescribed to the general and local legislatures respectively and so forth".⁴⁰ That evening, though, he spent quietly playing chess aboard the ship and engrossed in the intriguing sport of catching lobsters over the side.

Then on Wednesday, September 7, the Canadians heard that the conference was unanimous "in regarding federation of all the provinces to be highly desirable *if the terms of union could be made satisfactory*".⁴¹ There was a final grand ball the following night, given by the inhabitants of the island in the parliament buildings. Brown, however, escaped about midnight as the supper was coming on. "After the supper the Goths commenced speech-making and actually kept up for two hours and three-quarters, the poor girls being condemned to listen to it all!"⁴² Then in the early hours of the morning the rest of the Canadian party came parading back to the ship, and they set sail for Pictou. Thus closed one of the gayest whirlwind courtships in Canadian history.

In truth, the festivities went on in Halifax, Saint John and other points thereafter, but the essential end had been accomplished and the pace was less hectic. Brown found himself "unusually nervous" before his major speech at the public dinner in Halifax — "people expect so much".⁴³ But it went off very well, and he was in high spirits — hopeful and enjoying himself, well pleased with the country and the people. Furthermore, "we have got on very amicably — we Canadians — wonderfully so!"⁴⁴ They ended with "a delightful run up the St. Lawrence. Our expedition has been all and more than we could have hoped".⁴⁵

He stayed in Quebec for only a few days after returning there on September 19, "up to the ears morning, noon and night",⁴⁶ drawing up reports for council, signing minutes, and catching up on a pile of accumulated correspondence. It was now evident that he would have to postpone the longed-for trip to Scotland even further, since the Maritime meetings had resulted in an agreement for a further conference on British North American union to convene in Quebec on

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* (Compare Whitelaw, p. 223.)

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, September 12. This letter from Halifax was actually meant to be Brown's report on the Charlottetown meetings to his wife, but he was compelled to close it hastily, and thus sent his long letter — just discussed — the next day.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, September 19. (Compare Whitelaw, p. 228.)

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, September 23.

October 10. It would only sit a week, he hoped in his impatience, and then he would finally get away.

In the meantime, he went up to Toronto to look after private affairs. The *Globe* was moving to a new office, just as Browns were moving to a new home. There was much to do, both to attend to the newspaper business he had hardly thought of for long weeks (though by now the *Globe* was quite big enough to run itself for a considerable period) and to deal with weighty matters of new house furnishings and decorations. He lived an austere existence by himself — “doing Robinson Crusoe”⁴⁷ he called it — in a silent empty house, where all the carpets were up, and the crockery, linen and drapes packed away in barrels. “I breakfast at Sarah’s and dine downtown at a restaurant, and Sarah sends one of the girls to make up my room. I get home in the afternoons and work without interruption, I put on my own fire, draw water and brush my boots. There was not a morsel eatable or drinkable left in the house but plum cake and two bottles of champagne! The latter are gone and the former is fast going!”⁴⁸

Back in Quebec, once the conference had opened, he was far too busy even to write to his wife until the weekends. “We have had such a week of it!” he reported wearily on Saturday, October 15, at 2 a.m., “Council from nine to eleven — Conference from eleven to four — Council again from four to six and sometimes till seven — every day — and then letters and Orders-in-Council to write at night. It has been very hard work. However, the deliberations of the council go on harmoniously and there is no appearance yet of any insurmountable obstacle.” But he still managed to exclaim glowingly and at some length over baby Maggie, who was now “a great girl with six teeth.”⁴⁹ The next week was even busier. Even so, because it was mail day for the British steamer on October 17, Brown brought Council to adjourn at four so that he could write to Anne.

“The Conference proceedings get on very well”, he told her, “considering we have a great deal of talkee-talkee, but not very much practical administrative talent among our Maritime friends. We were very near broken up on the question of the distribution of members in the Upper Chamber of the Federal Legislature — but fortunately we have this morning got the matter amicably compromised after a loss of three days in discussing it. We have eight or ten other points of great difficulty yet to be got over — and if the talk goes on as heretofore on each of them it is impossible to say when we will get

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, October 1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, October 15.

through". Yet distressed as he was at the constant postponement of his departure, he knew that his wife would not "wish me to imperil all my work and ruin myself with my political friends throughout the country by abandoning this great scheme at the very moment when a firm hand was most needful".⁵⁰ He was sure of it. "How painful, my own Anne, would have been our long separation but for this perfect confidence that we could not misinterpret each other. For me I enjoy continually the most agreeable quiet chuckles when I think how perfectly lovable and loving my Anne is."⁵¹

Somehow, in the midst of all the weighty deliberations, the formal dinners and balls, the sense of great historic moment at the Quebec Conference, he moved in a world of his own, resenting any interruptions ("pestering") of his letter-writing, snatching glances at his Maggie's photograph in Council meetings; showing it, and probably making a nuisance of himself, on all possible occasions—as when Mrs. Pope "coaxed him" to exhibit it to the ladies of the Maritime delegates at the Executive Council's ball. "They were all perfectly charmed and declared there never was so beautiful a photograph before!"⁵²

And then on October 27: "All right!!! Conference through at six o'clock this evening—constitution adopted—a most creditable document—a complete reform of all the abuses and injustices we have complained of!" He was dashing off his note in a moment just before starting for Montreal—"They are crying to me to hurry and my baggage is gone down. There they are again! You will say that our constitution is dreadfully Tory—and so it is—but *we have the power in our hands* (if it passes) *to change it as we like!* Hurrah!" These, then, were his chief reasons for jubilantly accepting the new scheme. The evils of the old union, the old domination, had been ended. The new union, he confidently expected, his party would be able to mould as it saw fit, thanks to the representation by population that would give Upper Canada the largest block of seats in the federal legislature. It goes without saying that he expected that Clear Grit Liberals would continue to occupy the great bulk of those Upper Canada seats.

Now in Toronto, as he went on tour with the Quebec Conference delegates, he again voiced his satisfaction to Anne. "The Constitution is not exactly to my mind in all its details. But as a whole it is wonderful—really wonderful. When one thinks of all the fighting we have had for fifteen years—and now finds the very men who fought it every inch now going far beyond what we asked—I am

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, October 17.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

amazed and sometimes alarmed lest it all goes to pieces yet. We have yet to pass the ordeal of public opinion in the several provinces — and sad indeed will it be if the measure is not adopted by acclamation in them all. For Upper Canada — we may well light bonfires and build monuments the day it becomes law. Nearly all our past difficulties are ended by it — whatever new ones may arise.”⁵³

He was, he said, “determined to sail by the *Persia* on the 16th of November”.⁵⁴ He settled all his business matters for two months to come: he scribbled “half a thousand letters”;⁵⁵ he had the new house well in order with their servant, Jane Campbell, “fairly domiciled” there; and the wallpaper all ordered for their return, including for Maggie’s room, “a bright lively pattern for the little darling to wonder at, and a pretty border around it”.⁵⁶ And then, at long last he could leave.

“In two or three days from the time this reaches your hand”, he wrote on November 11, “I will, if all is well, be with you at Abden House! . . . Sunday the 27th is the anniversary of that happy, happy day when Anne Nelson became mine — and if I can reach Edinburgh by that day you may depend on my doing so. But it is pretty safe to calculate confidently on being with you on Monday — and so, as great events happening on Sunday are always kept on Monday, why we will just celebrate our great event on that day”. It was only unfortunate that he could spend but a day or two in Edinburgh on arriving, before leaving on official business to London. “I am sorry to say they have piled up lots of matters for me to negotiate with the Government folks in Downing Street during my short stay in England.”⁵⁷ But he would hurry through it — and this was only a small cloud on the bright anticipation of their meeting.

He finally did get away on the 16th. The great Confederation scheme which he had done so much to carry forward through this critical year of 1864 — and yet which was in many ways an impediment to his closer, warmer, private interests — could impede him no longer. When next we hear of him, he is in London on December 3, negotiating with the Imperial government.⁵⁸ But this largely represents the opening of a new phase in the Confederation movement, and need not be considered here. It seems enough, in conclusion, only to hope that George Brown did reach Anne in Edinburgh by the anniversary of their wedding day.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, October 31.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, November 7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, November 11.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, December 3.