

The Charlottetown Conference

Professor Thomas H.B. Symons' perspective in the foreword to The Landscapes of Confederation

Who is Thomas Symons?

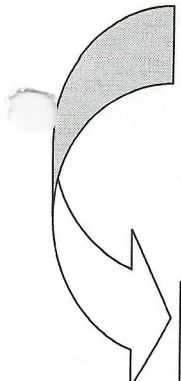
Founding President and Vanier Professor Emeritus of Trent University; teacher and writer in the fields of Canadian Studies, contemporary intellectual and cultural issues, international academic and cultural relations; founding member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of Canadian Studies; founding member of the Board of the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions; Chairman of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, of the National Statistics Council, and the Advisory Committee on the National Atlas of Canada; no other Canadian is as closely associated with Canadian Studies in Canada and around the world as Thomas H.B. Symons.



Educated at the University of Toronto and at Oxford and Harvard Universities, Professor Symons has been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and awarded honorary degrees by fourteen Canadian universities and colleges. In 1985 the University of Colombo conferred upon him the degree Doctor of Letters in recognition of "outstanding service to human rights and higher education throughout the Commonwealth." In 1997 he was appointed a Companion of the Order of Canada. The International Council for Canadian Studies honoured him in 1998 as recipient of the fourth annual Governor General's International Award for Canadian Studies. The Symons Medal and Lecture on the State of Canadian Confederation has been held in Charlottetown, PEI, since 2006 and is named after Professor Symons.

- The whirlwind round of hospitality and festivities has often been mocked or ridiculed by . . . critics. But several observations may be made.
 - It certainly demonstrated that the political Founders of the country were people of remarkable physical stamina and resilience! One must be struck, too, but their ability to have a good deal of fun while on a profoundly earnest mission.
 - The ice was rapidly broken between the delegates, most of whom were total strangers to one another. Social discourse discovered mutual concerns and shared interests. Suspicions were alleviated.

- Bonds of personal friendships, and relationships of trust and collegiality, were formed which were of great value during the working out of the differences in the political process. Some of those friendships proved to be of last importance during the building of Confederation . . .
- Numerous themes emerged during the discussions at the Conference:
 - ✓ The delegates had no doubt about their identity: they saw themselves as British North Americans deeply attached to the Crown, to British Institutions, and to their membership in the British Empire. The British connection was very important.
 - ✓ Delegates held the view that, as British North Americans, they belonged to a community which, in the words of the Attorney General of New Brunswick, "differed materially from that across the border," which had the advantages of flexible constitutional arrangements that could be "adapted to the growing requirements of its people. Hence its superiority over that of the States of America."
 - ✓ While their discussions showed a constant awareness of the threat posed to them by the powerful armies of the great neighbour to the south . . . and while they had no wish to sever ties of affection and allegiance to the Crown, the delegates were not a group of expats [ex-British] yearning over nostalgic memoirs of the Mother Country. On the contrary, they were strongly rooted and well-established in their respective communities with no wish to be elsewhere.
 - ✓ The Delegates were very conscious of the failings of a federation-style of government thanks to the defects that had allowed the American Civil War to happen.
 - ✓ Issues of language, culture, and social policy, were not that much discussed.
 - ✓ While it was a meeting of the *Fathers* of Confederation, women were very much present. Women shared in the shaping of the spirit which animated the Charlottetown Conference, as they shared in and shaped the extraordinary social program which enveloped it and moved it forward.
 - ✓ The absence of any Aboriginal participation in the 1864 Conference should be no surprise in a country which still barely provides for such participation in its arrangements for the shaping and administration of public policy.
 - ✓ Despite these and other reservations, any evaluation of the 1864 Charlottetown Conference must conclude that it was an astonishing success.

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- ✓ The Charlottetown Conference overcame the isolation, and the sense of isolation, of the British North American colonies. It gave to them a sharper realization that they were separated not only by geography but also by the divisive arrangements of their separate governments. It directed their eyes to the possibility that a federal union would bridge the isolation and gave them a glimpse of what might be a new and enlarged comradeship in which the prospects, and security, of all might also be enlarged.

It is important to note that the British Colonies saw themselves as SEPARATE and ISOLATED – not already part of some sort of pseudo-Canada