

ALFRED G. BAILEY

CONFEDERATION DEBATE

Alfred Goldsworthy Bailey (1905-1997) earned a bachelor's degree from the University of New Brunswick in 1927 and published the poetry collections *Songs of the Saguenay* (1927) and *Tao* (1930). He then earned a master's degree and a doctorate in history from the University of Toronto and worked as assistant director and associate curator of the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John from 1935 to 1938, when he became head of the history department at the University of New Brunswick. His collection *Border River* (1952) presented poems based on historical events, and a similar technique can be seen in the following poem, which was published in the winter 1968-1969 issue and included in the collection *Miramichi Lightning* (1981).

In eighteen sixty-six on the floor of the House
Billy Needham said "Mr. Speaker . . ."
and the Union men knew what was coming.
Wary of words, drumming fingers on desks,
their faces went bleaker.
White-haired David Wark called them to action
for the Province's and the Empire's good;
admonished the visionless and the factional,
sounding the changes on obstructionism and rejection;
stultification and penury written in ledgers
with statistical precision; the timber shipments
that might last the century out—with prayers:
prayers and a question of hard cash,
a typical New Brunswick contingency.

Or anyone's contingency, for that matter.
They could not repeat forever identical processes

in a world that would not stand still.
 Some said the timber rafts would soon be a
 thing of the past:
 and the great fleets of sail, the ships,
 dolphin-strikers plunging, making way down
 the Bay,
 in a span of numbered years
 would no longer be seen clearing the ports.
 Grass and silence, the derelict warehouses,
 empty and derelict.
 They could listen to the voice of the wind.

But there was more than trade reports that
 made men dream.
 There were those like old David Wark
 who would
 live to be a hundred, and even Mitchell and Tilley,
 men who many supposed were shy of the
 far-fetched, the grandiose, the insubstantial,
 who seemed to see something else, something beyond them
 that even gave pause to the prophets
 of the economically, financially,
 and politically disastrous.
 Even Billy Needham with his statistics was
 ultimately unable to cope with it.
 It grew somewhere deep down in the
 magmal regions of men's souls.
 It went beyond promises, inchoately glimpsed,
 of prosperity, prestige, and the enticements
 of power.
 Perhaps it was partly a sense of the largeness
 of things, of the land;
 although they could not actually see
 a gull flying over the Strait of Georgia,
 another ocean, the roll of the Pacific,
 the beaten smoke-stacks and the freight of China;
 dimly beyond the Lakes, the summer prairie,

and Palliser’s Triangle, someday to be
 celebrated
 by those trained to read
 the meaning of landscapes.

Perhaps it was something that could not be
 put into words
 like a railway advertisement
 of a sequence of magnificent vistas;
 but a way for men to live in peace and
 freedom,
 with mutual forbearance,
 speaking in half the languages of Europe
 and Asia,
 with rights grounded in law.
 Whatever else it was it could have been all of
 these things,
 but there were not very many who could see this
 in the session of eighteen sixty-six,
 and not many the year after.