

# Booze, Bribery & Ballots

*J.W.J. Bowden*

*Ballots and Brawls: The 1867 Canadian General Election.* Patrice Dutil. UBC Press, 2025.

Patrice Dutil's *Ballots and Brawls: The 1867 Canadian General Election* marks the fourth entry in the University of British Columbia Press series on Turning Point Elections, overseen by Gerald Baier and R. Kenneth Carty. An eminent Toronto-based historian, Dutil has written extensively on executive authority and Canadian prime ministers in general, Sir John A. Macdonald in particular, the history of Confederation, and on the federal general elections of 1911 and 1917. Here Dutil has written what he calls "the first book dedicated solely to the 1867 election" using contemporary newspapers and diaries. I corroborate his self-assessment and commend Dutil for having brought his historian's sensibility to bear. He devotes his last two chapters to analysing the election results in great detail, making this tome a useful reference for students of political history and living up to the promise of this series.

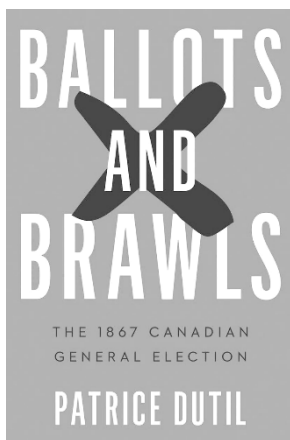
*Ballots and Brawls* lives up to its title. Canadians did not start voting by secret ballot across all provinces in federal elections until 1878; the open voting of 1867 therefore led to many fist fights — some even involving the leaders of political parties or the candidates themselves — in the boozy atmosphere of the mid-19th century. The acerbic and sanctimonious radical George Brown undersold his own "ardent temperament," having violently assaulted a bystander at a train station who

told him that he was glad that he had lost his riding. With more justification, Thomas D'Arcy McGee punched Bernard Devlin, his main electoral opponent in Montreal, after the latter denounced him as "damned scoundrel" two days after winning his seat. Elsewhere in Quebec, the Bleus won two ridings by acclamation only after kidnapping their rival Rouge candidates. The election in Kamouraska broke into a riot which saw the returning officer barricade himself in his house. That riding did not return a member, Liberal lawyer, Voltigeur officer, Fenian Raid veteran (and future Lieutenant-Governor) Charles Alphonse Pantaléon Pelletier, to the House of Commons until 1868.

The primitive and sparse communications of 1867 have forced Dutil to rely mainly on letters and newspapers to study the election and to focus on local campaigns. The telegraph existed in 1867 but remained "monopolized by Hugh Allan" of the Montreal Telegraph Company, Dutil writes, and for "commercial needs." Astute readers will

recall that Macdonald mired himself in corruption, defeat in the House of Commons and a general election, and over four years in opposition because in the midst of one of his drunken stupors in 1872, he wired the same Hugh Allan for "another \$10,000."

Dutil provides the background on Confederation of some of the British North American colonies in the 1860s and one chapter on the first federal general election in each of the four provinces. In this era, true Canada-wide



election campaigns had not yet emerged. He writes the chapters covering the election in New Brunswick, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia because the four original provinces voted sequentially in that order instead of at the same time as would seem obvious and necessary today. Each province to some extent debated its own issues and its own local political elites: the Dominion had yet to develop a political identity and limited roads prevented a true Canada-wide campaign. Party leaders simply could not travel easily outside their own provinces, especially before the Inter-Colonial Railway connected New Brunswick and Nova Scotia to Quebec and Ontario in 1872.

Political parties remained loose associations full of independent-minded men not afraid to express their differences of opinion with one another or their leaders. That riotous world is utterly unrecognisable compared to the leader-driven cults of personality which have dominated Canadian politics since the Liberals and Conservatives started electing their leaders by delegated conventions or party membership a century ago. A litany of newspapers covered ranges of opinion and also served as vehicles for prominent politicians. Dutil recounts that in 1864, British North America housed 23 dailies, 226 weeklies, and 27 monthlies and that Timothy Anglin and Leonard Tilley of New Brunswick, Joseph Howe and Charles Tupper of Nova Scotia, George Brown and Sir John A. Macdonald of Ontario, and Antoine-Aimé Dorion and George-Étienne Cartier of Quebec either themselves ran or could count on the personal backing of major newspapers, the *Halifax Chronicle* supporting Howe and the *Toronto Leader* and the *Ottawa Times* supporting Macdonald for example.

The first general election of the Dominion of Canada, held between Aug. 7 and Sep. 20, consisted of four separate elections in each of

the four founding provinces, each operating on its own rules and taking place at different times in a variety of ways that we would find appalling and rigged today. Only New Brunswick had already adopted the secret ballot by 1867. In the other three provinces, electors had to declare their vote in front of an audience. Voting usually took place over the course of two or three days. Candidates would announce their intention to run; if

they remained unchallenged, then they would be acclaimed. If other candidates wished to contest the riding, electors typically voted on the second day, and the returning officers tallied up the votes and made the result known before voting resumed on the third day. And the franchise itself in this era depended upon each province's laws and usually remained the preserve of propertied men over the age of 21. A Nova Scotian needed either to own \$150 in property or make at least \$300 per year,

while a New Brunswicker had to own at least 100 *pounds* (\$400). (The federal Parliament did not make the Province of Canada's dollar the Dominion of Canada's dollar until 1868.) Ontarians needed to own \$200, while Quebecers required \$300 in the city or \$200 in the country. In total, only about 15% of the population held the right to vote in 1867. Bribery ran rampant, and parties often plied electors with free alcohol. Worse still, polling officers sometimes used the administration of oaths to the Queen in Quebec and New Brunswick to discourage French Catholics from voting in what we would today call voter suppression.

Dutil grounds his analysis in each province by following the campaigns of the various party and factional leaders. Party discipline as we now understand it simply did not exist in the 1860s, enabling the ever-shifting allegiances of what Macdonald called "loose fish." Dutil covers New Brunswick's colonial

elections of 1865 as well as the federal election in 1867 through the campaigns of Tilley, the Liberal premier of New Brunswick who nevertheless supported the Conservatives and Liberal-Conservatives of Macdonald and Cartier and found little in common with the Liberals rallied by George Brown, the radical Clear Grits, or the anti-Confederate Liberal Timothy Anglin.

The chapter on the election in Ontario follows the campaigns of Sir John A. Macdonald, Brown, and that of William McDougall, a Clear Grit who had broken with Brown to support Macdonald and Confederation. Dutil describes the election in Quebec as a “contest of nationalisms” between Irish Catholics, French-Canadian Catholics, English Protestants, and various pro- and anti-Confederation forces. He follows the campaigns of George-Étienne Cartier, the leader of the *Bleus*, Antoine-Aimé Dorion, who led the anti-clerical *Rouges*, the *Rouge* dissenter Médéric Lanctôt (whom Dutil describes as “quixotic” but who seems like the ancestor of today’s Quebec Solidaire, given that he founded a newspaper called *L’Union nationale* which supported Quebec’s independence, denounced the Quebec Conference of 1864 as the “Quebec Conspiracy”, and founded the Grand Association for the Protection of the workers of Canada), and of Thomas D’Arcy McGee, the former Irish republican nationalist who came to champion British pluralism and constitutional monarchy in a trans-continental British North America. Finally, Dutil showcases the election in Nova Scotia, which voted last and registered the highest turnout, through the campaigns of Joseph Howe, the old stalwart of Responsible Government, former colonial premier, and leader of the Anti-Confederates, and Charles Tupper, the lone Conservative victor.

The Conservatives won 71 seats and the Liberal-Conservatives 29 for a combined 100

seats in a House of Commons which consisted of only 180 seats at the time. The various factions calling themselves Liberals secured only 62 seats, while the Anti-Confederates won 18. The first federal election saw a turnout rate of 74.5%, with 268,677 out of 360,792 eligible voters casting their ballots. These, in turn, amounted to 8.3% of the population out of the total 11.1% eligible to vote. Dutil re-

counts that the Dominion’s first federal election saw 46 seats, or 25% of its contests, decided by acclamation. The Conservative and Liberal-Conservative coalition won 29 of these 46, while the Liberals won thirteen and the Anti-Confederates four.

Historians face a difficult task piecing together the details of this election where the official results do not even list party affiliations. Dutil estimates that across the four provinces, the Conservatives and Liberal-Conservatives, which coalesced under the leadership of Sir John A. Macdonald, won a small plurality of only 94,997 votes, or 35.4%, while the Liberals won 59,456 votes, or 22.1%. The Anti-Confederates in Nova Scotia won 21,239 or 7.9% of the total, and the “unknowns and independents” won almost as much as Macdonald’s Coalition, at 92,985 votes or 34.6%. Dutil also provides detailed breakdowns of the votes and proportions for each party and independents province by province.

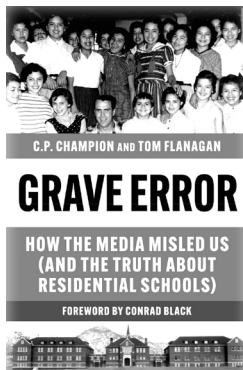
Dutil shows clearly that the fragile Dominion owed its existence to the promise of new east-west infrastructure. Here the Inter-Colonial Railway played a crucial role. Section 145 of the original *British North America Act, 1867* actually made the line from Quebec City to Halifax mandatory, to start within six months of the union and to continue “without intermission” and “with all practical speed” until completion. Railways and the promise of infrastructure featured heavily in the 1873

Terms of Union for Prince Edward Island (running a federal ferry to the mainland in New Brunswick and assuming the colony's existing railway debt) and those for British Columbia in 1871, which famously included a constitutionally entrenched promise to build a railway to link up with British Columbia's.

Readers today will find these promises of national infrastructure to forge an internal common market sadly and aching familiar in the midst of another trade-war, facing American tariffs just as we did in the 1860s. Washington's decision to withdraw from the Reciprocity Treaty after the requisite ten years in 1865 helped make Confederation happen. Yet even today in 2025, Canada remains riven with barriers to inter-provincial trade which contradict the very purpose of a federation and in defiance of section 121 of the BNA Act. In response to the threat of American protectionism, our politicians have now pledged themselves to dismantling them through mutual recognition of varying provincial regulatory standards. The Inter-Colonial Railway opened fully in 1876, and the trans-continental Canadian Pacific Railway did not start carrying freight until 1885, four years behind schedule. If we struggled to complete on time these public works of the 19th century, we can expect any infrastructure today, with all our modern impediments, to fall decades behind schedule.

## GRAVE ERROR

*A collection of essays exploring the moral panic around "unmarked mass graves"*



\$20.97 soft  
349 p.

Edited by C.P. Champion and Tom Flanagan

After the announcement by the Tk'emlups First Nation of the "discovery" of unmarked graves, many politicians,

Indigenous leaders, and media threw aside balance, restraint, and caution, turning truth into a casualty. Public discussion of Indian Residential Schools issues is now filled with the following assertions:

- Thousands of "missing children" went away to residential schools and were never heard from again.
- These missing children are buried in unmarked graves underneath or around mission churches and schools.
- Many of these missing children were murdered by school personnel after being subjected to physical and sexual abuse, even outright torture.
- The carnage is appropriately defined as genocide.
- Many human remains have already been located by ground-penetrating radar, and many more will be found as government-funded research progresses.
- Most Indian children attended residential schools.
- Those who attended residential schools did not go voluntarily but were compelled to attend by federal policy and enforcement.
- Attendance at residential school has traumatized Indigenous people, creating social pathologies that descend across generations.
- Residential schools destroyed Indigenous languages and culture.

All of which are either totally false or grossly exaggerated.

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