

# The Canadian "Dalmatia" at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919\*

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The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 settled, or failed to settle, questions affecting the destinies of moujiks and Melanesians, Liberians and Latvians. The Canadian Pacific coast was also suggested once as a topic for discussion. I offer the following memorandum and letters as an example not only of the peripheral interests of the Paris Peace Conference, but also as an example of one of the intermittent problems of Canadian-American relations.<sup>1</sup> The problem of the Alaskan panhandle was certainly not a novel one, but the setting in which the issue was raised, and the arguments employed, lend it a certain piquancy.<sup>2</sup>

On April 26, 1919, John J. O'Gorman, then a major serving in the Canadian Section of General Headquarters, wrote a lengthy memorandum on the problem of the Canadian "Dalmatia," using President Wilson's arguments concerning Italian claims to the Dalmatian port of Fiume as his own arguments.

## THE CANADIAN DALMATIA

Magnificent as was President Wilson's appeal to Italy to forego her claims to Fiume and Dalmatia, one can readily understand how difficult Italy finds it to make the great renunciation.<sup>3</sup> Why, she asks, should she be called upon to abandon her Promised Land, when other nations are having their widest claims most generously satisfied. America, by virtue of the Fourteen Points

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Mr. Henry Borden who has graciously given me permission to publish these documents. They are found in the David Lloyd George Papers, Beaverbrook Library, London, England, in file F/5/3/44.

<sup>2</sup> H. C. Allen, *Great Britain and the United States: A History of Anglo-American Relations (1783-1952)* (New York, 1955), pp. 609-614 notes earlier attempts to negotiate the Alaskan boundary.

<sup>3</sup> The stand Wilson took on Dalmatia was logically inconsistent, for he had already accepted far less justifiable compromises. Still, his position is emotionally comprehensible. The Italian view of his action is equally explicable. "Now, after having made concessions left and right to respectable interests," said the Italian Foreign Minister, Baron Sonnino, "she [the United States] wants to recapture her virginity at our expense by invoking the purity of her principles," "Conversation entre les représentants des Puissances signataires du Traité de Londres, 21 April 1919," Paul Mantoux, *Les Délibérations du Conseil des Quatre* (2 vols., Paris, 1955), I, 302.

and League of Nations, would deprive Italy of Fiume and Dalmatia, yet in spite of the Fourteen Points and the League of Nations intends maintaining the Munroe [*sic*] Doctrine. If the United States were called upon to sacrifice something by virtue of the same principles, Italy would find it much easier to make her sacrifice. Now there is an exact parallel to Dalmatia on the western coast of Canada. From Alaska proper to the Dixon Entrance, that is, for well over five hundred miles, the western coast of Canada, for fifty miles inland, is owned by the United States. It is as unjust a boundary as any in the world and was obtained by the United States by mere chance. Alaska was a Russian colony, and the Russians stretched their claims southwards down the coast for over half a thousand miles. As nobody had settled the hinterland, or bothered about it, no objection was raised to Russia holding the coast. Then the United States, in a moment when British statesmanship was asleep, bought Alaska from Russia for a nominal sum and obtained with it several hundred miles of the coastline of the newly formed Dominion of Canada. Geographically the United States has as much right to this Canadian Dalmatia, as Canada would have to a strip of the American coast fifty miles inland from Maine to Long Island. Canada has long since abandoned her claim to northern Maine, yet America holds jealously to Prince of Wales Island, though the name in all truth is British enough.

A glance at the accompanying map [not in files] makes the matter self-evident. The hundred and forty-first parallel of longitude separates Alaska and Canada from the Arctic Ocean to within fifty miles of the Pacific Ocean. It should continue to be the boundary line right to the sea. A cluster of mountains stand here as the natural and eternal sentinel between Alaska and Canada, as 'the whole sweep of the Alps' separates Italy from her neighbours. Will President Wilson advocate this commonsense boundary and ask his country to forego her claim to Canada's coastline from Yakutat Bay to the Portland Canal? Up to the present, there has been no indication of any intention on the part of the American president or the American people to abate one inch of their claim in this region. The 'fifty mile inland' phrase was interpreted by the United States, not fifty miles from the Pacific coastline, but fifty miles inland from the deepest indentation, which brings the line a couple of hundred miles inland. The United States has not merely failed to be generous to her friend Canada in dealing with this question, but she has demanded the last ounce of her pound of flesh, as the result of the last arbitration on the Alaskan boundary showed.<sup>4</sup> The Canadian delegates returned feeling that they had been not merely ungenerously treated, but also cheated.

However, since then the United States has formulated the Fourteen points [*sic*] and 'the compulsion is on her to square every decision she takes part in with those decisions'. 'If those principles are to be adhered to, *Skagway* must serve as the outlet and inlet of the commerce, not of the *United States* but of

<sup>4</sup> S. F. Bemis notes that any other interpretation would be "inconceivable," Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Diplomatic History of the United States* (New York, [1936]), p. 425. He adds that any Canadian claim to land nearer the coast was "ridiculous and preposterous."

the land to the north and north-east of that port' — the Yukon and Northern British Columbia. The Yukon is a territory over five hundred miles in length and on an average a couple of hundred miles wide [*sic*: wide]. Yet its only egress to the sea, apart from the ice-bound and economically impossible Arctic, is through Skagway. How can the river commerce of Dawson, Ogilvie, Selkirk, with the gold of the Yukon, how can the commerce of the White Horse Railway, reach the sea except through Skagway? If Skagway is Canada's Fiume, the coast and islands from the Lynn Canal to the Portland Canal, form a perfect geographical parallel to Dalmatia. There is this difference, however, Italy claims only part of the islands and ports of Dalmatia, while the United States holds the whole five hundred and more miles of coast from Yakutat Bay to the Dixon Entrance. This should be given to Canada at once. 'There can be no fear of the unfair treatment of groups of *American* people, because adequate guarantees will be given, under international sanction, of the equal and equitable treatment of all racial or national minorities'. As Canadians and Americans are not like the Croats and the Italians, hereditary enemies, but, on the contrary, hereditary friends of the same language and blood and ideals, and as all the American settlers on the whole coast from Mountain-bound Alaska to the Canadian terminus of the Grand Trunk Pacific do not number as many as the inhabitants of Fiume, the difficulties connected with America's giving up this territory are immeasurably less than those connected with Italy's renunciation of Fiume and Dalmatia. Here is the golden opportunity for President Wilson to convince the world that his ideals, which are the ideals of all Christian democracies, can hold their own in this hard, selfish world.

John J. O'Gorman

Somewhere in France,  
26th April, 1919.

O'Gorman sent a copy of this memorandum the same day to Sir Robert Laird Borden, Prime Minister of Canada, who was representing Canada on the British Empire Delegation to the Peace Conference.

Dear Sir Robert Borden, —

I enclose a letter on "Canada's Dalmatia", dealing with our claim to the western coastline, from the 141st parallel to the Portland Canal. I am sending this letter to the Press.

Would it be possible, at this juncture, to bring up this question diplomatically? As things stand, Canada is deprived of half the coast of British Columbia on the west, and, to a certain degree, of the whole coast of Labrador on the east. Surely it should be our desire to rectify this.

I have the honour to be,

Sir

Your obedient servant,

(sgd) John J. O'Gorman

Major,  
D.A.D.C.S., Canadian Section,  
General Headquarters, 1st Echelon.

Borden seems to have taken the matter quite seriously. He had already mentioned the problem, he will admit in the letter below, to Lord Milner, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, and to the Prime Minister of Great Britain, David Lloyd George. Since this matter was not for public consumption, in contrast to the shrieks of Canadian outrage over the Alaskan Boundary Commission's decision two decades before,<sup>5</sup> it seems that Borden was, in fact, seriously concerned about the matter. Of course, it is possible that he simply wanted to establish a bargaining position with the British, but Canada had no particular desires, at this point in the Peace Conference, that were not being fulfilled.

For unknowable but probably sincere motives, Borden forwarded O'Gorman's memorandum and letter to Lloyd George, with a covering letter of his own endorsing the proposal.

29th April, 1919.

Dear Mr. Lloyd George, —

A Canadian officer has put in a rather convincing way the situation on the western coast of Canada of which I have spoken to yourself and to Lord Milner. A very prominent American assistant delegate has had a confidential conference with me on the subject in which he strongly urged that it should be taken up during the Peace Conference. It was suggested that British Honduras, which remains, I believe, quite undeveloped, might be given in exchange.

Faithfully yours,  
(sgd) R. Borden

The question never was raised formally at the Peace Conference in the Inter-allied discussions.<sup>6</sup> The "very prominent American assistant delegate" is never identified, perhaps to the distinction of his memory. The conditions under which the matter was discussed are not indicated; I am inclined to suspect the conversation took place toward the end of a lengthy dinner. It is curious, also, that while "self-determination" was supposed to be a guiding principle at the Paris Peace Conference — in contrast to simply ignoring the wishes of a territory's inhabitants, as Utrecht or Vienna had done — there is no mention here of the wishes of the inhabitants either of the panhandle or of Honduras. In any event the O'Gorman Memorandum and Borden's approval of it died without issue.

<sup>5</sup> Allen, pp. 613-614.

<sup>6</sup> Not at the Council of Ten, Council of Four, or Council of Foreign Ministers, nor in the Meetings of the American Commissioners Plenipotentiary, United States, Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1919, The Paris Peace Conference* (13 vols., Washington, 1942-47), Vols. III, IV, V, VI, and XI, *passim*. It was not raised at the meetings of the British Empire Delegation, CAB 29/28/1, Public Record Office, London, England.