SANDFORD FLEMING AND THE PACIFIC CABLE: THE INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY OF IMPERIAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Graham M. Thompson
McGill University

ABSTRACT

Sandford Fleming (1827-1915) spent the greater part of his life "furthering the establishment of national works of inter-communication" such as the transcontinental railroad (1885) and telegraph (1886), the Pacific Cable (1902), and the coordinating grid of World Standard Time (1983-85). Fleming’s exploits help draw the parallels between the role of communication technologies and institutions in the projects of late nineteenth-century Canadian nation-building and British empire-building.

Sandford Fleming (1827-1915) a passé la majeure partie de sa vie à "promouvoir l’établissement de projets nationaux d’intercommunication" tel que le chemin de fer transcontinental (1885), le télégraphe (1886), le câble sous-marin du pacifique (1902), et la standardisation mondiale du temps. L’œuvre de Fleming mais aide à établir des parallèles entre la rôle des technologies de communication et des institutions dans les projets de developpement de l’etat canadien et de l’empire Britannique à la fin du 19e siècle.

Canada’s cyclical attempts to forge and reforge a political community via the binding powers of communication and transportation technologies is a tradition of imperial lineage. That is, Canada’s technological nationalism (Charland, 1986) is the offspring of British technological imperialism.

While the relevance of digging up and dusting off the records of Canada’s nineteenth century international telecommunications history may not be
immediately apparent, it permits us to learn a few lessons from the failure of technological imperialism to reconstitute the British empire. Today the relevant question remains: if naked technological connectivity could not preserve an empire, what sustains our enduring faith in the power of the latest electronic technologies to constitute and reconstitute a nation as geographically disparate and culturally diverse as Canada?

The life of Canadian railroad engineer Sir Sandford Fleming (1827–1915) embodies the kaleidoscopic conjunction between the technologies of the railroad, telegraph, and submarine telegraphy in the overlapping projects of Canadian nation-building and British empire-building in the late nineteenth century.

Fleming’s polytechnical exploits in railroad surveying, the movement for establishing international standard time, and lobbying for the realization of publicly-owned systems of integrated telegraph and submarine cable communication systems, are detailed in his biography (Burpee, 1915), and a copious number of political circulars promoting his pet projects: the Pacific Cable (1902), and the Imperial Intelligence Union (1906).

The Pacific Cable was to connect the nations of the “outer empire” (Canada, New Zealand, and Australia) independently of London (the hub of imperial communications) while the intelligence union was intended to disseminate “useful knowledge throughout the Empire...for the mutual enlightenment and mutual advantage of all classes in each separate British Community,” (Fleming, 1906:4)¹ within a federated empire.

In Fleming’s exploits we can also discern the parallels between Canada’s domestic, European, and imperial campaigns for public ownership of the means of electric communication.

Canada’s domestic and international telecommunications systems tend to be perceived as functionally discrete systems; perhaps because of their operational independence.² Historically, the promotion of imperial unity through the establishment of transoceanic telegraphy, for example, is presumed to be incompatible with the project of Canadian nation-building³ via the establishment of east-west railway lines.

Yet, transoceanic cable advocates saw the national system as but a component of a larger imperial—international—system. The domestic system was designed to promote east-west national development and unity within the transforming international economy.

Addressing the Canadian Club in Toronto in 1904, Fleming maintained that Canadian development required that we “learn to think at one and the same time Continentally [east-west] and Imperially,” (Burpee, 1915: 265):
The railway from the Atlantic to the Pacific when completed would bring nearer to England her Eastern Empire [India]; it would unite with a new bond the interests and the affections of the Queen’s subjects in Europe, Asia, Australia, and America; it would secure in perpetuity British dominion upon this continent; it would promote the occupation and civilization of half a continent, and go a long way to lay the foundation of what might be regarded as a Canadian Empire.

Communications historian Robert Fortner (1979: 27) established the link between domestic railway, telegraph, and international submarine telegraphy—the C.P.R. and the Pacific Cable—when he noted that “Canadians saw the Canadian Pacific Railway, for instance, as an imperial project,” and that “one of the men most closely associated with the C.P.R., Sir Sandford Fleming, also originated the idea of the Pacific Cable.”

Today we arbitrarily punctuate our communication systems along the lines of Canada’s national boundaries. Looking back, we may not necessarily see any significance in the geographical proximity of the terminus of the C.P.R. and the origin of the Pacific Cable. Yet, when Fleming first outlined his cable vision to the forgotten Atlantic cable pioneer F.N. Gisborne in 1879 it was described as a physical extension of a projected telegraph line between Victoria and Ottawa (Burpee, 1915: 154—5):

The Pacific terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway will...be finally determined this year...and the telegraph now erected from Lake Superior and carried almost to the base of the Rocky Mountains will then be extended to tide water in British Columbia. In my last report laid before Parliament, I submitted the importance of connecting Lake Superior with Ottawa...If these connections are made, we shall have a complete overland telegraph from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast. It appears to me to follow that, as a question of imperial importance, the British possessions to the West of the Pacific Ocean should be connected by submarine cable with the Canadian line.

Fleming envisioned our telegraph system to be a component of a greater international transportation and communications infrastructure. In this global context, the relevant unit of analysis was not the autonomous nation-state, but a nation operating within a larger system of antagonistic empires pursuing their interests in territorial conquest and consolidation.

Cultural historian Stephen Kern (1983) argues that late nineteenth-century imperialism was an early manifestation of the new internationalism emerging within the industrialized world between 1880 and 1918. Fleming’s technological imperialism is best digested in this context.

Technologically, this increasingly integrated international order consisted of a network of urban hubs bound by steel, steam, and electric wire: the
railroad, steamship, land and ocean telegraph. A new sense of international interaction arose, "created by technology and mediated by urbanism and imperialism," (Kern, 1983:240). "Lines of communication and transportation were extended over unprecedented distances," Kern writes (1983: 240), "spreading out and at the same time bringing people into closer proximity than ever before..."

A new "robust imperialism finally infected the British after 1870," when Disraeli succeeded Gladstone (Fortner, 1979: 27). Though the British were not uniform in their support of Disraeli, his regime marked the onset of a revitalized and retooled British imperialism.

As a junior partner within the empire, Canada internalized the imperative of territorial expansion and embodied it in the three components of MacDonald’s nation-building mission: the transcontinental drive to the Pacific, the settlement of the West, and national tariff (Berger, 1970: 4).

Therefore, Canada’s legacy of technological nationalism (Kroker, 1984: 10; and Charland, 1986) was the offspring of British technological imperialism and the Pacific Cable was the imperial twin of the C.P.R.'s east-west telegraph system.

It is not coincidental that Kern singles out Fleming as an active proponent of the new international culture of time and space. Fleming was one of many whose organicist electric utopianism signalled the dawn of a new internationalism grounded in the technics of electromagnetism.

**Fleming’s Role in Promoting Public Ownership in Telecommunications**

In Fleming’s grand scheme, the Pacific Cable was to serve as the cornerstone of an imperial system of globe-girdling, state-owned cables, that would bypass the existing private systems. The late nineteenth century movement for public ownership of European telegraph industries, which was also adopted in Australia, did not survive the Atlantic crossing. The following European nations nationalized their telegraph systems in addition to the U.K.’s move in 1870: Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, Prussia, Russia, Sardinia, and Spain.

The primary inspiration for Fleming was the British case.

Fleming’s persistent lobbying for public ownership in international and national telecommunications prefigured subsequent bids to nationalize the means of Canadian telegraphy and telephony in the first decade of this century. The history of Canadian telecommunications nationalization was not limited to the three provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.

Fleming’s lobbying was presented in the numerous circulars he arranged to have published, and amplified by many of the politically influential colleagues...
he worked with. Postmaster General William Mulock was one prominent recipient of Fleming's lobbying efforts, prior to his appointment as Canada's representative on the board of the joint government owned Pacific Cable. In his letter to Mulock, Fleming wrote (1901: 36):

At the threshold of the twentieth century, high imperial interests demand the cheapest possible telegraph transmission, and the greatest possible freedom of intercourse between all the subjects of Her Majesty wherever they may be domiciled around the globe. I respectfully submit therefore, that action cannot be taken a day too soon to nationalize our telegraph system by land and sea throughout the whole empire.

One month later Fleming's close friend and co-promoter of the Pacific Cable, former Minister of Trade and Commerce Sir Mackenzie Bowell, cited the cases of English and Australian state ownership in his appeal for the extension of the nationalization campaign to the telephone industry:

I think it would be to the advantage of Canada to take possession of the telegraph lines in this country as well as the telephones...England has done that, and the Australian colonists own not only the telegraphs, but the railways. I am sure, that State ownership is a very great advantage.

There are a number of links between Mulock, Fleming, the cable project, and imperial and domestic nationalization campaigns that warrant further study.

Yet, the promotion of public telegraphy activated a network of imperial detractors. From the date of its proposal in 1879, the Pacific Cable was subjected to a twenty-three year odyssey of private and public institutional resistance orchestrated from London. The joint government owned cable (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, U.K.) posed a direct threat to the monopolistic vested interests which controlled the existing imperial transoceanic telegraph system.9

The Pacific Cable undermined the private monopoly10 on telegraphic communications between England and Australia which ran East through Europe and Asia. By completing a globe-girdling electric circuit any Australian, for example, could now either send their messages West along the private systems, or East along the public Pacific Cable. The institution of competition drastically deflated the exorbitant rates charged by the previous Eastern monopoly.11

The second source of institutional resistance to the construction of the cable was the British government, which found itself efficiently lobbied by the allied cable interests. The U.K. believed the cable to be of less value to itself than the outer empire of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.12 Britain confirmed its indifference to the cable project by happily delegating responsibility for the cable's construction and maintenance to Canada (U.K., 1899: 560).
The case of Necker Island illustrates how the national interests pursued by Canadian imperialists were often at tight angles to those of British imperialists. In his attempt to outmanoeuver the British and save $2.25 million Fleming even financed his own covert operation to secure the ideal cable landing station (geographically and financially) near Honolulu.

The most suitable choice was an uninhabited and unclaimed crag of rock 400 miles west of Honolulu called Necker Island. By landing the cable on Necker and dividing the cable between Vancouver and New Zealand into two sections Fleming avoided the cost of laying and maintaining an excessively long cable—the world's longest at the time. Necker was also the ideal landing-station for future line to Hong Kong and Japan.

When Britain ignored Fleming's appeals to take possession of the island in 1894, he took matters into his own hands by underwriting a secret operation to raise the Union Jack on Necker. To achieve this objective Fleming enlisted a retired naval officer from Toronto to sail to Honolulu, from where he was to book a steamer and proceed to Necker, survey the island's most suitable landing places, unfurl the imperial flag, and leave behind evidence of his visit to legitimize the anticipated claim of British sovereignty.

Yet, in "a diplomatic stroke for which one searches in vain for a parallel," (Burpee, 1915: 180), the British Foreign Office revealed the plot to the Provisional Government of the Hawaiian Islands, headed by U.S. national Sanford B. Dole. Accompanied by a group of fellow Americans and indigenous collaborators, Dole had recently overthrown the government of the indigenous Hawaiian Queen.

After being tipped off by the Colonial Office, Hawaii claimed Necker on the 27 May 1894. As a result, Britain was forced in 1888 to search for other cable stations and consequently claimed the Fanning, Christmas, Penrhyn, and Suwarrow Islands. The excess cost of laying the cable by the longer route to Fanning Island "amounts to something like two and a quarter million dollars in excess of the cost via the Necker Island route," (Burpee, 1915: 189).

Fleming's frustration with British foot-dragging at all stages of the cable's planning illustrates that both Britain and Canada had formed radically different views about the value of international government-owned telegraphy in general, and the Pacific Cable in particular. Whatever word is used to describe Canada's relationship with Britain during the planning of the cable, passive should not be one of them.

The cable project also received its most enthusiastic public support outside of the U.K. In a letter which was released to the press in May 1899 (Burpee, 1915: 164–6) in an appeal for public and diplomatic support in moving the
British government from its “masterful inactivity,” Fleming made the following appeal:

This letter, with the announcement of the attitude of the Imperial Government, produced a storm of protest throughout the Empire. The representatives of the self-governing Colonies in London were instructed to make urgent representations to the Home authorities of the views of their respective governments. Leading newspapers of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain, voiced the general disappointment of the people. The Minister of Public Works of Canada was sent to England as a special representative to explain in person the views of the Dominion Government. The day before he landed, however, the Home Government yielded to the universal pressure, and in a generous and graceful spirit not only agreed to support the Pacific Cable, but went further than either Canada or Australasia had asked or expected.

Persistent British resistance to the cable project indicates that it had a negligible, even negative, impact on Britain’s geopolitical interests (Smythe, 1981: 140), because for the first time it furnished the dominions and colonies of the outer-empire with direct communications between one another, bypassing Britain. The urban centre of London, which formerly mediated all Canadian-Australasian telegraphic discourse, was marginalized by the establishment of the cable.

ENDNOTES

1. “What the circumstances require and demand to-day,” Fleming argued in support of his Imperial Intelligence Union (1906:5), “is fully organised public service, having at its command a complete system of connected Cables girdling the Globe; an electric circle forming an instantaneous means of communication by which the millions may be reached daily, or at least frequently, in each and every self-governing British Community in both hemispheres...”


4. The Pacific Cable was first publicly alluded to in Fleming’s parliamentary report on the C.P.R. in 1880 (Fleming, 1901: 30).

5. “Steam has made the separating oceans no longer barriers, but the general medium of union, electricity, has furnished the means by which the British people in all parts of the globe may exchange through as freely as those
within speaking distance. These twin agencies of civilization are pregnant
with stupendous possibilities," (Fleming, 1901: 22).

6. Daniel Headrick (1981: 12) argues that there were three different phases of
imperial advance: penetration, conquest, and consolidation. "In the phase of
consolidation, the links that tied the colonies to Europe and promoted their
economic exploitation included steamship lines, the Suez Canal, the sub-
marine telegraph cables, and the colonial railroads." Canada's ongoing
project of east-west nation-building has been an extension of this phase of
territorial consolidation through the deployment of transportation and com-
unication technologies.

7. "There has been a prolonged struggle between public and private interests," wrote Fleming (1901: 15), "but at length the public interests have triump-
phed. The principle of State ownership and State control of sub-marine
cables was formally confirmed on December 31st, 1900, when the contract
for laying the Pacific Cable was signed." Fleming's imperial intelligence
union was also to be a joint government owned enterprise running between
England, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, India, South Africa, and West
Indies (Gordon, 1906: 21).

8. "The transfer was effected in 1870" wrote Fleming (1907: 15). "Changes
and improvements were immediately made: the telegraph service, pre-
viously confined to lines connecting great cities where business was lucra-
tive, was extended to many towns and districts previously neglected, and, notwithstanding the fact that the charges on messages were greatly reduced,
the business developed to such an extent that the receipts progressively in-
creased. Before the transfer it cost about six shillings to send an ordinary
message from London to Scotland or Ireland. The rate was reduced to a
shilling, and subsequently to six pence (the rate at present charged), and for
that sum a telegram can be sent from any one station to any other station
within the limits of the United Kingdom, without regard to distance."

9. "Probably no other of the great projects associated with the name of Flem-
ing more strikingly illustrates his sheer tenacity of purpose...Fleming had to
overcome first of all the apathy and indifference of the people of the great
self-governing colonies; then the masterly inactivity of the British Govern-
ment; finally the active, resourceful, and power opposition of the group of
wealthy cable companies which held a monopoly of the business between
England and Australia, and naturally enough were loath to part with it," (Burpee, 1915: 154).

10. In their lobbying against the Pacific Cable one of the private cable
interests' favorite tactics was to comically exaggerate the obstacles that the
Pacific Ocean posed to the safety of the cable. "There were tremendous
seismic disturbances that would lift and shatter to little bits the heaviest cable ever made. The coral, the deep holes, the jagged precipices, the subterranean fires bursting through the Pacific’s bottom and consuming the cable as a straw in a gas flame, the earthquakes, the deep waters in constant agitation, at depths were all pressed into the service of the conjurer. Whose aim was, by their manipulations, to impress upon the various Conferences and Committees the utter folly of the scheme that Sir Sandford Fleming advocated... “(Johnson, 1903: 300).

11. “The mere advocacy of the Pacific cable has already benefitted Australia by lowering charges levied on messages fully fifty per cent, and any accountant can estimate the enormous money value of this benefit by the saving which has already accrued during the past ten years,” (Fleming, 1901: 32).

12. “I am to remind you,” wrote the Colonial Office on the 28th of April 1899, “that in the various communications which have been from time to time addressed to the Colonial Governments on this subject, Her Majesty’s Government have never concealed their opinion that the construction of a Pacific Cable is a matter of much greater importance to Australia and Canada than to the United Kingdom...the Colonial interest in the matter may be more direct and apparent than that of this country.”

13. Here too the private interests which monopolized eastern telegraphic communications were busy negotiating exclusive access to Hong Kong at the expense of the public system. “Under an agreement, dated 28th October, 1893, the Eastern Telegraph Extension Company strengthened its monopoly by having Canada and the Australasian Colonies telegraphically excluded from Hong Kong and forbidden to lay, or assist in laying, any new cable to that port for a period which does not expire until twenty years from the present date [1898],” (Fleming, 1901: 19).

14. The British Admiralty was a prime culprit in the delay of the cable through its refusal to complete the survey that proceeds laying of the cable. First, no spare vessel could be located for the survey, forcing Canada to offer one, which was predictably declined. Even when Fleming and a colleague offered to finance half the cost of the survey ($90,000) the Admiralty did not stir. This roadblock was only surmounted when an astute delegate to the Colonial conference of 1894 in Ottawa suggested that tenders for the cable construction include the survey in their bids.

REFERENCES

Babe, Robert. “Emergence and Development of Canadian Communication: Dispelling the Myths.” In Communication Canada—Issues in Broadcasting


Fleming, Stanford. Circular Letter from the Ottawa Board of Trade on State-Owned Cables and an Imperial Postal Cable Service for the Empire, With Appendices on the same Subjects by Sir Stanford Fleming. Ottawa: Ottawa Board of Trade. June, 1901.


Fleming, Stanford. An Address to His Excellency Earl Grey, Governor-General of Canada, with His Excellency’s Reply, and other Documents Bearing on the Proposed Imperial Cable Service to Girdle the Globe. Ottawa: Ottawa Board of Trade Papers, 15 November 1907.


