

Andrew R. Gordon to C.H. Tupper, Minister of Marine & Fisheries

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The defenceless condition of the Canadian coasts has occasionally been the subject of remark in the press, and in the Maritime Provinces the subject has been frequently brought to my notice.

Just how defenceless the coast is only a naval man can appreciate. Suffice it to say that, with the exception of Halifax, an ordinary armed mail steamer (such as would be utilized by the score in the event of any European war) could lay under tribute or demolish every town of importance on the coast. She could destroy coaling piers, canals, &c and play general havoc, on the defenceless place.

It is often stated that we may trust to the British Navy to protect our shores, but if Great Britain were engaged in war with any European Maritime Power, it is admitted by every one who has kept himself posted in naval matters that the English Government would be compelled to recall a large portion of the North American Squadron for the protection of their own coasts and commerce.

In former times Great Britain maintained a fleet more than twice as strong as that of France or more than equal to any combination of the two greatest European fleets.

Since the introduction of heavy modern artillery, thick armour, Torpedoes, Belted Cruisers etc., the policy of England in regard to naval construction has been very vacillating. Ships have been built whose performances have been most disappointing; and it is only stating a fact which naval men admit, though to which they are in no way responsible, to say that the British fleet while still superior to any individual continental fleet no longer retains the proportional superiority which it formerly enjoyed.

It will not do to wait until war is declared before doing anything for Canadian Defence because after such declaration was once made, or even sooner, if it were thought that there was

even a probability of war being declared, the ship builders of Great Britain would have their books immediately filled with orders for the construction of defence vessels for English ports.

The British Government in regard to home defence, already take the ground that municipalities must bear a share of the cost of any specially erected defensive works, and if this system of administration is put in force in regard to home affairs, it is only reasonable to anticipate that we as merely allied Governments would be treated still more rigidly.

To understand the situation, imagine for one minute, that war has suddenly been declared between France and England. Every iron clad or superior cruiser on the Western Atlantic would be recalled at once for the protection of British interests in Europe, leaving only such small vessels in the West Indies as would be necessary to watch the French Naval force in that part of the world.

At the same time on the French side all steamers in their ports would be immediately seized and held for Government uses. The magnificent steamships of the “Messagerie Maritime” would many of them be fitted as cruisers and any one of these fast steamships coming on our coast, could in the present condition of affairs not only harass and injure our commerce by sea, but would for instance steam quietly into North Sydney, and sending a boat ashore would inform the people that the whole place would be blown about their ears and fired, unless ransomed, and that the coaling piers would in any case be destroyed, but that if a shot was fired at the men engaged in the demolition of the piers, the whole place would be razed and burnt. What force has Canada for instance to offer for the defence of such a place in a by no means improbable emergency like this? We have no local artillery or forts which for a minute could offer any resistance that would not simply mean sacrifice and that uselessly of gallant lives.

An ordinary armed mail steamer could do all this and more, and could go as coolly as possible from place to place as a surveying ship, knowing that she could run away easily, from any English man of war which might eventually be detailed to check her depredations.

I am not considering an attack on any part of our coasts by a regular foreign fleet for I write this with the idea that the enemy's fleet of war ships are if not blockaded at any rate kept under such surveillance by first class cruisers of the British Fleet that they would be followed and fought before they could do extensive damage.

What we have to consider is the defence of the country as against an “Alabama” having ten times the power of offence that this historic vessel had, being faster and armed with more powerful guns.

Canada’s coast defences when completely developed should besides the ordinary artillery have a completely developed system of torpedo defence for each of the principal ports, consisting of plans for the placing of stationary submarine mines, floating mines and Whitehead Torpedoes, but first and principally, in the possession by the country of one or two vessels of the “Rattlesnake” class. In my letter to the Hon M^r Foster of November 3rd 1886, I urged the purchase of two of this small class of Torpedo Vessels to be used for the purpose of protecting our Fisheries, and also to form the nucleus of a regular system of coast defence. These vessels are of light draught of water, are capable of maintaining a high rate of speed and can steam long distances at moderate rates.

The very best type of this class of vessel in the British service is the “Rattlesnake” built by Laird of Birkenhead; this vessel is built largely of steel, is subdivided into numerous water tight compartments and was built to be the most efficient vessel possible without regard to cost. Her tonnage is 450 gross. Horsepower developed 2700, greatest draft 9^{ft} 11ⁱⁿ, length 200 ft, beam 23 feet (very much the size of the Acadia). She carries 7 guns, four torpedo tubes complete with all fittings air compressors and reservoirs etc. The guns are, one 4 inch gun capable of penetrating 3 inch armour; this gun is protected by a steel shield to screen the men from the fire of musketry and machine guns; the remaining six guns are 3 pounder quick firing guns of the Hotchkiss pattern. The total cost of the vessel armed and equipped £35,00 say \$150,000.

She steamed on trial, mean of six runs, 19 1/2 knots, can steam at the rate of 11 knots for 2800 miles, with the coal she carries in her bunkers. The engines are two sets of triple expansion engines driving twin screws, two locomotive boilers with forced draught fans. The boilers are protected by the position of the coal bunkers from an enemy’s fire and the engines by an extra plating of 3/4 inch thick.

Such a vessel would be quite a match for any ordinary armed mail steamer and could pass up through the St. Lawrence Canals, going from Halifax to the Welland Canal in three and a half days if weather was favourable. The possession of even one such vessel would be of incalculable advantage to the country and a couple of these would not only render attacks by

armed mail steamers very hazardous undertakings for the enemy but if it was generally known that they were there the attacks would be much less likely to be made.

In regard to any possible rupture with the United States, two such vessels would actually give us command of the Lakes, before the United States could do anything to stop them they would be up there and once there would soon give an account of themselves.

In regard to their common use as Fisheries Police and Revenue cutters they would have the great advantage over the “Acadia”, now in the service, of being able to go into all the harbours that the U.S. fishing vessels frequent. At the present moment there is not a single harbour on the North Shore of P.E. Island into which I can take the “Acadia” because she draws more than fourteen feet of water whilst these vessels draw less than ten and as they lighten up to less than nine as the coal burns out they would also pass easily through the St. Lawrence Canals; on these grounds they would be much more valuable as “Cruisers” than any vessel of the Merchant-Ship or Yacht class which we now have.

The cost of the “Acadia” delivered in Halifax was, I believe, somewhere about \$45,000.00, since then the repairs and alterations made in her have cost a large sum. I cannot say exactly how much but probably between thirty and forty thousand dollars, so that this ship has cost us say about eighty thousand dollars.

With the single drawback that she cannot go into many of the harbours frequented by the fishing craft, she is for mere police work a very useful vessel and a good sea boat, but she would not be of any use, except as a scout, in case of war.

If a vessel for the defence of our coast was to be built, I would alter the armament of the “Rattlesnake” taking away two of the Torpedo tubes and giving her two of the new 4 inch guns instead of one, retaining the six quick firing guns, this would make her quite a match for the mail steamer class of cruiser.

If, however, the Government do not see their way to spending so much money let us have the Hull and Engines at any rate; the ship being so built that torpedo tubes can be put in later and the guns and mountings might also be for the time omitted, though I should greatly regret this latter omission.

White of Cowes, Isle of Wight, England, built some of the early vessels at £12,000 for the hull and engines but these vessels I learn were too badly strained when driven through a sea.

We might reduce the cost of the “Rattlesnake” class by reducing the number of subdivisions and if the guns were not put in the magazines need not be, but I would not reduce the size of the vessel and she must be built ready for placing the torpedo tubes and scantlings must be specially designed to carry the guns; in this way we could probably cut the price below £20,000 stg: that is really the unarmed ship ready for guns and torpedoes — and if we could without actual heavy loss dispose of the “Acadia” a vessel of the class I name could be easily built between the present time and June 1st of next year, the first day of the mackerel fishery. It should always be remembered that guns and torpedo tubes may be bought but ships take time to build. The success of this class of vessel in the recent naval manoeuvres in Great Britain was very marked; one of them ran the blockade of the southern squadron and committed great depredations on shipping in a very few days. I consider that for size and money they are the most formidable type of vessel that have ever been designed or constructed.

If we had one or two of these vessels the scheme for coast defence by utilizing Tugs and small steamers as torpedo vessels with volunteer crews at such ports as St. John, Yarmouth, Sydney and Pictou would become practicable as we should have in these vessels trained men who could act as instructors to the volunteers.

I would most strongly urge upon your consideration and that of the Government the advisability of grappling earnestly with this question of national defence.

I only state what every naval man will reiterate that in the next naval war in which Great Britain takes part, she will want more ships and men than she has, to protect her own coasts and the commerce necessary to her existence.

I feel sure that any move in this direction would be warmly appreciated by the vast majority of Canadians.

The sum at present asked for the Fisheries Protection Service would still be the same if, instead of the “Acadia” and “Canadienne” we had two regular vessels built with a view to their utilization for purposes of defence; guns once purchased cost nothing to keep and torpedoes are not wasted in practice. If the “Canadienne” and “Acadia” were replaced as I suggest we could manage with one less schooner for the fast vessel could do this Labrador work and be back on the mackerel grounds in time for the height of the season.

To make a beginning if a vessel is wanted for British Columbia the “Canadienne” might be sent there and a new vessel sent out here to take her place.

If this matter were to come to receive the serious consideration of the Government I should be glad to report further or could communicate with people in England who would give me more particular information.