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‘Patrice Dutil, Ballots and Brawls: The 1867 Canadian General Election’

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Patrice Dutil, *Ballots and Brawls: The 1867 Canadian General Election* (UBC Press, 2025), 328pp. Paperback. C\$27.95. ISBN: 978-0-7748-7139-6.

It would be difficult to imagine the federal election of 1867 *not* being a turning point election – it was the first, after all, and surely announced a turn from separate colonial contests to a future, for better or for worse, together. In being the first, the election of 1867 set the tone for what was to follow. It was, then, a turning point election, and certainly worthy of a study in a series of “turning point elections.” Strangely, though, that does not necessarily mean it was important, and despite his heroic efforts to make the case for the significance of this first of dozens of federal elections, Patrice Dutil does not quite convince.

His was a monumental task: without polls or careful analysis of the results, he reckoned with a small and amply used source base. As a result, he had to understand the election of 1867 in much broader terms than one usually uses to analyze elections. He considered the players within their contexts, and the long lead-up to the actual casting of ballots in the summer and early fall of 1867. The result, then, is far more than a consideration of the first federal election in Canada, and much closer to an overview of the Confederation era. And while this is a very readable introduction to the process of Confederation, that is not quite what it purports to do. As an analysis of the election itself, it turns out that there really is not all that much to say. It is almost as if the election was not particularly important, and that it only served as a confirmation of the events that had already taken place.

Dutil provides a lengthy chapter on the negotiations leading to Confederation, followed by chapters on each of the four new provinces. In following these more local elections, Dutil shines a light on the key politicians within each, emphasizing the personalities that dominated the electoral races. John A. Macdonald – a frequent subject for Dutil – is clearly the most significant, which means that Ontario and Quebec end up with perhaps more than their fair share of analysis. The players are familiar – George Brown and Antione-Aime Dorion and George-Etienne Cartier figure prominently, if clearly overshadowed by the political prowess that Dutil accords to Macdonald. And when Dutil can offer insights into the election itself, through newspaper analysis and archival letters, he makes an interesting argument about the ways competing nationalisms played out in Quebec, and the way old rivalries emerged on the hustings in Ontario.

Where the election of 1867 is interesting, as countless scholars have argued before, was in the Maritimes. In New Brunswick, Confederation was debated for a third and final time, and in Nova Scotia it was debated once and handed a drubbing as Nova Scotia sent 17 of 18 anti-Confederation MPs to Ottawa in the fall of 1867.

These two provinces get less attention than do Ontario and Quebec, which is unfortunate. Perhaps material was not available, but in each case, the election was more than just the next phase of the Confederation debates and instead a real expression of opinion on the way forward. That Nova Scotia ended up backing off its initial dogged opposition to Confederation does not detract from the importance of the election.

Even if this book is not quite so focused on the first election as it pretends, it nevertheless offers a lively retelling of the Confederation era, some interesting glimpses of the way Confederation was marked in each of the new provinces, and an argument about what each province was grappling with when its electorate went to the polls in the late summer of 1867. The fact that the real turning point had already happened is simply an inconvenient trick of timing.

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