

'The Ship of State' Decoding the Satire of Fuller's *H.M.S. Parliament* Nicholas Guerreiro — University of Victoria

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Canada's National Policy, 1880

In 1879, the new Dominion of Canada, less than two decades old, experienced an identity crisis. Despite a reputation for corruption, John A. Macdonald's Conservatives retook Ottawa after a disastrous recession plagued the short interregnum of Alexander MacKenzie. Macdonald's party had campaigned on a radical response to the economic downturn—the National Policy. First proposed in 1878 by Macdonald when he was leader of the opposition, the National Policy, or "N.P." as it was known, was "a judicious readjustment of the Tariff, [...] that was to] prevent Canada from being made a sacrifice market" in competition with the United States or Great Britain (*Debates* 3rd Parliament, 5th Session, 854). This reform of the Tariff code, which increased border duty by up to 25%, was designed to encourage Canadian industry (Tilley 5).

Not everyone was fond of the N.P. and its protectionism, however. Liberal-leaning Canadians felt that "Protection [was] a monopoly benefitting the few at the expense of the many" and that it increased prices for the consumer (Home Industries 5). Furthermore, some saw isolationism as "un-British" and inappropriate for the nation. Canada's mother country was among the few "wedded to Free Trade" (*Debates* 4th Parliament, 2nd Session, Vol. 1, 740), and thus Canada's tariff was "disloyal to the interests of Great Britain" (Ibid. Vol. 2, 1091). This conflict between Canadian nationalism and British imperialism drives the 1880 satire *H.M.S. Parliament*.



Topley, William. "Centre Block, Parliament Buildings." *Topley Series*. 1859-1915. Library and Archives Canada. Web. 9 March 2016. William James Topley/Library and Archives Canada/PA-009260.

The Play

Two victories inspired William Henry Fuller to pen *H.M.S. Parliament*. One was the resurgence of Macdonald and the Tories. The other was the success of W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*, a British nautical operetta that opened in 1878 and quickly reached the New World (Plant and Wagner 13). Its proliferation was such that, by 1880, a reviewer of *H.M.S. Parliament* announced of the score that "nearly everyone was tired of it" (Canadian Illustrated News 142).

Fuller, a newspaper satirist with poetic ambition and a friendly animosity for John A. Macdonald, used the plot of *H.M.S. Pinafore* as a template for a pointed political satire on Macdonald's government. Fuller had targeted the Old Chieftain twice before, in 1873's *Ye Ballad of Lyttel John A.*, and 1874's *An Unspecific Scandal* (Edwards 152). While he later tried his hand at original musicals, Fuller's wit was better suited to parody and mimicry. In comparing these two lyrics below, note how well Fuller matches Gilbert's style and rhythm.

H.M.S. PINAFORE, BARCAROLE.

Over the bright blue sea
Comes Sir Joseph Porter, KCB.
Wherever he may go
Bang-bang the loud nine-pounders go!
Shout o'er the bright blue sea
For Sir Joseph Porter, KCB. [...]
We sail, we sail the ocean blue,
And our saucy ship's a beauty.
We're sober, sober men and true
And attentive to our duty.
We're smart and sober men,
And quite devoid of fe-ar,
In all the Royal N.
None are so smart as we are.

H.M.S. PARLIAMENT, BARCAROLE

Up from St. John, N. B.,
Comes Sir Samuel Sillery, K.M.G.
Wherever he may show,
Up, up the prices of all things go.
Shout! for the great N. P.,
And Sir Samuel Sillery, K.M.G.
We sail the Ship of State,
And gallant Members we are,
We're ready in debate,
And quite devoid of fe-ar.
Our foes may rail, but they can't prevail
Against our majoritee,
And we'll have the sway for many a day
All along of the great N. P.

(Fuller 11 ; Gilbert 108-109)

The Crew of the *H.M.S. Parliament*

William Henry Fuller crewed the *H.M.S. Parliament* with caricatures of the most notable parliamentary figures of his day. While to the modern reader, the satires may be obscure or meaningless, to the contemporary audience, each characterization was "so cleverly done, that the expression leaves no doubt as to who is meant" (Canadian Illustrated News 142). Close examination of the Dramatis Personae therefore reveals not only the targets of ridicule in the script, but also the perspectives of the Canadian theatregoer on their government representatives.

CAPTAIN MacA.: "You're very, very good, and be it understood/ I've a large majoritee!" (Fuller, 8)

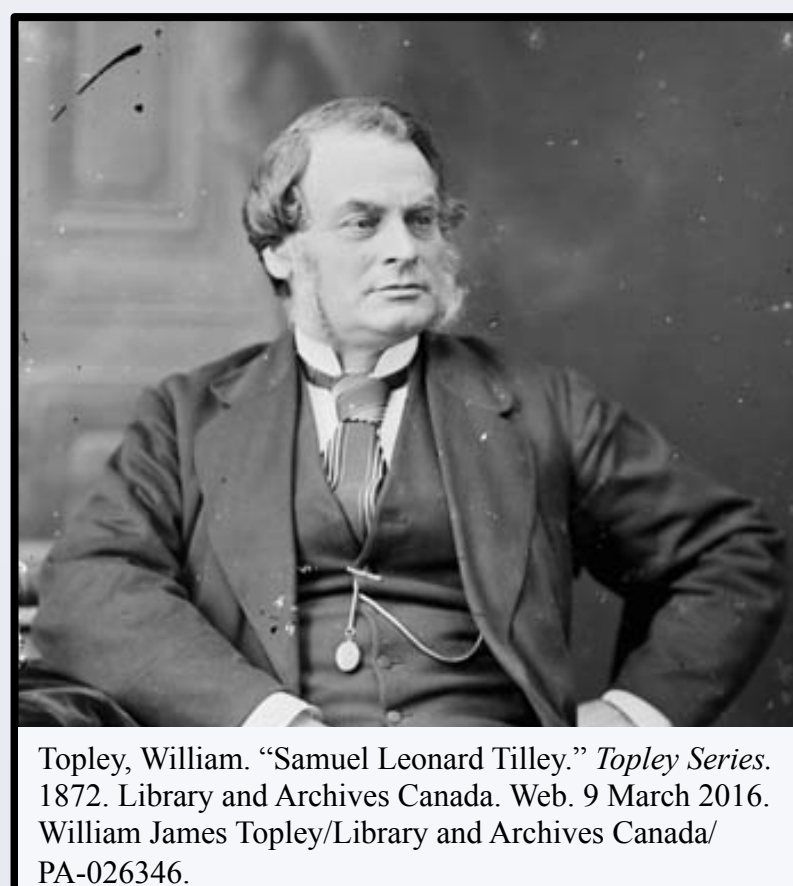


Topley, William. "John A. Macdonald." *Notman Series*. 1872. Library and Archives Canada. Web. 9 March 2016. Notman Studio/Library and Archives Canada/C-010144.

The captain of the *H.M.S. Parliament* is none other than the Old Chieftain himself, Sir John A. Macdonald. Fuller's depiction of Macdonald is ambiguous. Rather than sing of seasickness, as Captain Corcoran does in *Pinafore*, Captain MacA. instead protests that "Corruption is a thing I detest like anything, and it never has been charged to me," a blatant lie he soon qualifies with "very seldom" (Fuller 9). The Captain solves his problems by flinging government contracts at them, such as when he bribes Mrs. Butterbun with the inspectorship of the unfinished Coteau Bridge (Fuller 23). However, in the last scene of the play, the personification of Britain says to Captain MacA., that he is "remarkably like one of [her] own people, [and that he] resemble[s] him somewhat in other respects besides personal appearance" (Fuller 36). This is the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, whose appearance was so similar to Macdonald's that the latter was called "the Canadian Disraeli" (Tassé 85). Britannia suggests the Captain learn from his European counterpart and remain "free from reproach" (Fuller 36). Fuller thus implies that Macdonald is worthy of office so long as he remembers his British roots.



SAMUEL SILLERY: "I talked about figures in a way so free/ That now I am a Minister and K.M.G." (Fuller, 12)

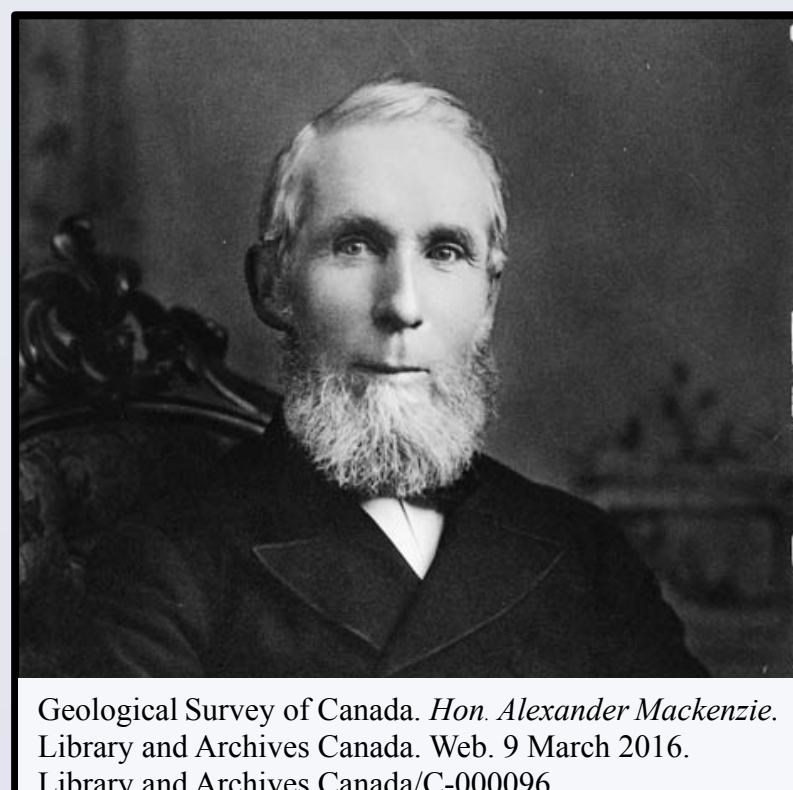


Topley, William. "Samuel Leonard Tilley." *Topley Series*. 1872. Library and Archives Canada. Web. 9 March 2016. William James Topley/Library and Archives Canada/PA-026346.

In *H.M.S. Pinafore*, W.S. Gilbert targets bureaucrats in the character of Sir Joseph Porter KCB; in *H.M.S. Parliament*, Fuller does the same with Porter's counterpart, choosing the Finance Minister Samuel Leonard Tilley as his target. If Fuller allows Macdonald leniency, Tilley gets no such consideration. Fuller lampoons Tilley as a pompous bore without qualifications for his station. *H.M.S. Parliament's* version of "When I was a Lad" accurately recounts Tilley's unconventional rise, from his start "as an errand boy in a druggist's store" (Fuller 12), to his position as "dispensing clerk" (Fuller 12), to his elevation to political office (Hannay 149). Suffice to say, Fuller did not feel this was sufficient experience for the position of finance minister. Sillery is also portrayed as a corrupting influence. He encourages the young clerk Sam Snifter to use his influence in Parliament to ensure a government contract for his patent corkscrew, little realizing that Sam Snifter is his rival for the heart of the Captain's daughter, the beautiful Angelina (Fuller 15). Much of the humour of the play comes from Sillery's inept courtship coupled with his unfounded pride.



ALEXANDER MacDEADEYE: "I dinna pretend to be onything mair than a honest working mon." (Fuller, 36)

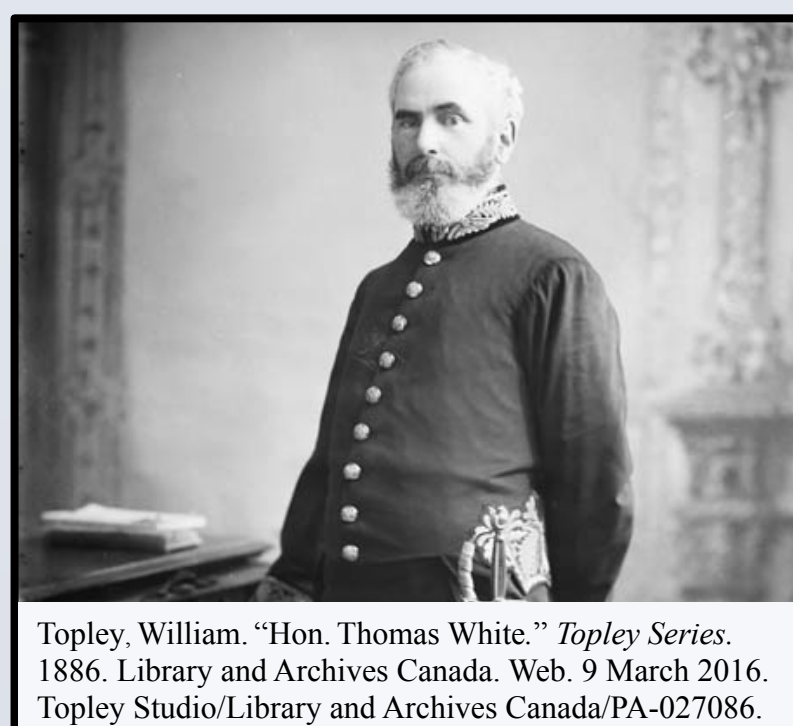


Geological Survey of Canada. *Hon. Alexander Mackenzie*. Library and Archives Canada. Web. 9 March 2016. Library and Archives Canada/C-000096.

The closest thing to a tragic character in *H.M.S. Pinafore* is Dick Deadeye, the menacing yet surprisingly honest sailor, from whose mouth "the noblest sentiments sound like the black utterances of a depraved imagination." (Gilbert 103) In this role, Fuller casts Alexander Mackenzie, the leader of the Liberal Party. Despite his insistence on "honesty, integrity, and economy," (Thomson 333), Canada selected Macdonald for Prime Minister in the 1878 election with a huge majority. Fuller, who admits in the subtitle to his earlier parody *An Unspecific Scandal* that his work is "Critical" by nature (Edwards 150), uses MacDeadeye as a Cassandra figure, uttering warnings of corruption to which nobody listens. At the end of the play, Britannia chides MacDeadeye for not accepting a knighthood due to his workman's pride, implying that it was "not very complimentary" to her (Fuller 36). Mackenzie refused a title many times in his life (Thomson 367).



TOM BLACK: "They'll have to increase our sessional allowance at this rate." (Fuller, 6)

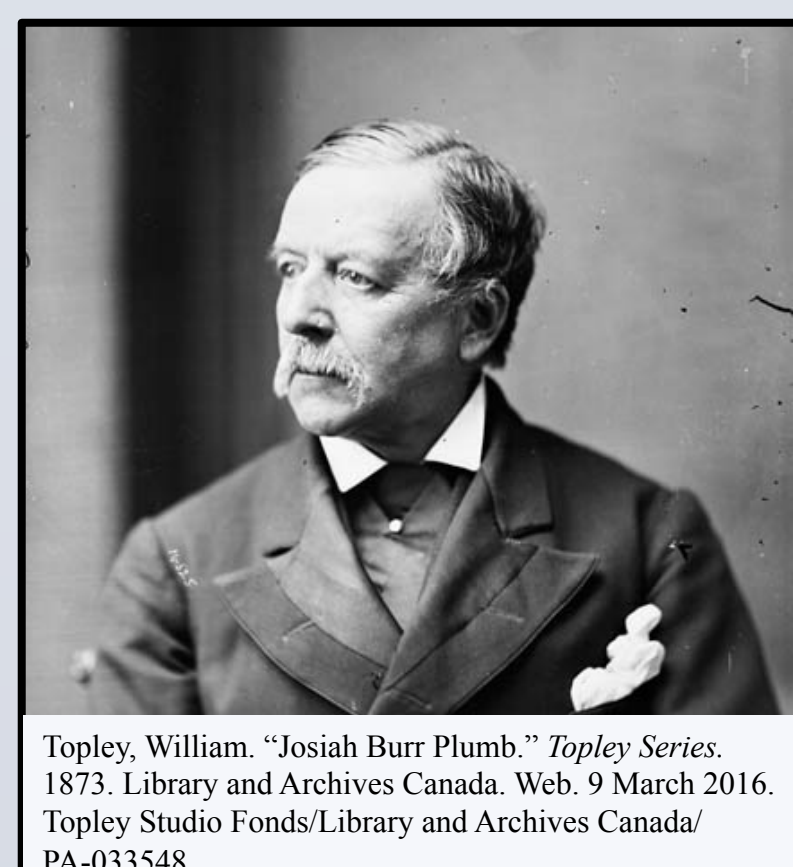


Topley, William. "Hon. Thomas White." *Topley Series*. 1873. Library and Archives Canada. Web. 9 March 2016. Topley Studio/Library and Archives Canada/PA-027086.

While the reviewer of *H.M.S. Parliament* for the *Montreal Gazette* affirmed that "Tom Black is easily recognizable" (4), to the modern reader he is the most obscure. It is tempting to identify him with Nova Scotia Senator Thomas Black, but as Black did not become involved in federal politics until the 20th Century, it is unlikely (Latta). A more likely source is the *Gazette's* owner, the Honourable Thomas White, a committed Tory (Canadian Press Association, 24). Tom Black is described as a "Statistical Member" (Fuller 4) that composes "leading articles" defending the N.P. (6)—the perfect description for a money-minded editor.



BEN BURR: "You ought to give me one for nothing for such an exquisite stanza." (Fuller, 6)



Topley, William. "Josiah Burr Plumb." *Topley Series*. 1873. Library and Archives Canada. Web. 9 March 2016. Topley Studio/Library and Archives Canada/PA-033548.

When seaman Ben Burr announces he is "to be appointed the Poet Laureate of the Dominion" (Fuller 6), we cannot take him at his word, as the position was only established in 2001 (Parliament of Canada). The closest thing was the longwinded Tory Josiah Burr Plumb, who helped sell the N.P. to Canadians in the 1878 election. Plumb once recited a satirical poem in the House and was thereafter referred to by his enemies as "my [honourable] and poetical friend" (*Debates*, 2nd Session, 4th Parliament, 351). Ben Burr's proclamation "that the roar of the mighty cataract, beside which I have been nurtured, finds an echo in my verses" further supports this theory, as Plumb served as Member of Parliament for the Niagra district (Fuller 6).

"The members suborned in the commons we saw
By gold of the government minting
Who chattered, defiant of honour and law,
For Supplies, Transportation and Printing
A nation beside us, who made us its spoil
For Canada's rulers had taught her
That she could not protect her own children of toil
Or keep her own markets from slaughter."
—Josiah Burr Plumb, March 23, 1880. (*Debates*,
Second Session, Fourth Parliament, Vol. 1, 868.)

"Scenes in the New Political Burlesque Entitled H.M.S. Parliament." *Canadian Illustrated News* (Montreal, Quebec) 28 February 1880: 129. Print. Digitized by Early Canadiana Online.

Staging and Reception

H.M.S. Parliament opened on the 16th of February 1880, at the Academy of Music in Montreal (Gazette 4). This production, staged by the Canadian Manager E.A. McDowell, was lauded by reviewers for its Canadian subject matter. One, writing for *Rose-Belford's Canadian Monthly*, declared it "the first important native product of the dramatic line" (444). Another, writing for the *Montreal Gazette*, pointed out that "the production of a play purely Canadian in its bearing...[was] a novelty in Montreal" (4). While other Canadian parodies had been written and staged, *H.M.S. Parliament* was the first to achieve a full production. The *Canadian Illustrated News* praised the scenery, saying "Mr. McDowell... spares no expense in mounting his plays", and that the set piece of the "Parliament buildings illuminated called forth immense plaudits" (142). However, all reviews pointed out the weakness of the music. The *Gazette* critic stated that the conductor was "manifestly incompetent, and [that] many shortcomings [of the production] were due to him" (4). This one failing did not sink the *H.M.S. Parliament*, which, after a week of packed houses at the Academy (Canadian Illustrated News 142), sailed out on a profitable national tour (Plant and Wagner 13).

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