

Metropolitan Reflections on "Great Britain's Woodyard"

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METROPOLITAN REFLECTIONS ON "GREAT BRITAIN'S WOODYARD"

As usual, Arthur Lower has written a significant and stimulating book, bold in concept and broad in generalization, yet rich in vivid details that recreate the life as well as tabulate the cargoes of the British North American timber trade.¹ It is built, of course, on his early work on the traffic in square timber, his subsequent studies of Canada's lumber industry and forest frontiers, and his continuing research into the operation, organization and interests of the great staple enterprise that truly made this a "wooden country" for much of the nineteenth century. This provenance is made clear in his preface. Beyond that, he deals in the first half of the volume with the history of the developing timber trade between the British American hinterland and the British metropolis, notably adding material on the British consuming end of the relationship, and on the competing trade from the Baltic supply area. He also pays particular attention to the governing framework of British state policy: the differential duties and their effect, the shift from mercantilist to free trade presumptions. The second half of the work analyzes the varied socio-economic elements concerned with the far-reaching resource enterprise, from British and colonial merchants to timbermakers in the up-country forests of New Brunswick and the Ottawa Valley — the deal manufacturers, the craftsmen, the ship owners and the seamen — each as involved in Britain's great transatlantic woodyard in the era between the Conquest and Confederation. Yet all this vast and complex activity, it is concluded, brought little lasting benefit to the colonial peoples who so readily transmitted their forest capital, first to Britain, then to the United States. The book's final word — almost an epitaph on the subject — is that "A staple trade such as the timber trade is essentially an exploitative trade and in it the dice are loaded in favour of the metropolis" (p. 250).

The scope and sweep of the work should be evident even from the above cut-and-dried (or pre-shrunk) synopsis. Yet I would not regard *Great Britain's Woodyard* as a definitive study, nor mean real criticism in saying so. Despite Professor Lower's extensive knowledge and research, there is still more to be done on the theme of the timber trade and its affiliations before one can feel confident that an authoritative general pronouncement might be made. The treatment of the British timber market, its agents, practices, centres, and of the Baltic segment operating within it, needs fuller documentation from scholarly investigations now proceeding in Great Britain, and more research must be done on British lumber imports and their values from the

¹ A.R.M. Lower, "*Great Britain's Woodyard*": *British America and the Timber Trade, 1763-1867* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973).

and bills of entry. Further examination is required of the New Brunswick trade, for while the present volume assuredly does not neglect it, the author ultimately focusses on the timber activities of the greater port of Quebec, and in comparison gives less coverage to the still substantial functions of the port of Saint John, not to mention smaller Atlantic timber outlets. There is also a good deal yet to be done on the shipping and ship-building concomitants of the timber trade. The quality of "inferior" New Brunswick-built ships (and who deemed them thus) needs deeper investigation, especially since they evidently gained respect and a sizeable market in Liverpool, and since Lloyd's ratings and the testimony given before parliamentary committees raise many particular problems of evaluation. Research into ship insurance practices is called for, and into the wealth of data provided by port registers.²

Accordingly, it is simply too soon for a general study of Professor Lower's many-sided theme to be anything else than a further statement along the way. His book is a large and thoroughly enlivening contribution, that coherently and cogently brings together his wide store of information and perceptions and provides a basis for further inquiry and exemplification in new case studies. Who need ask for more, or count this as derogation of a very valuable work? As usual (again) Professor Lower has given us a lot to think about; and has inspired fresh discussion from the power of his conceptualization, no less than from the wealth of data he has spread before us. Indeed from this point onward, I intend to deal chiefly with the concepts he has employed, in part because, like many reviewers, I can talk more readily about what data the author has not covered "sufficiently" than try to tackle him on his own ground, on the body of material he *has* presented, and knows far better than I. But also, because Professor Lower largely pioneered in applying metropolitan concepts to Canadian history, I can thus take up a theme of much personal concern, "where stands metropolitanism now", using Lower's latest work, unabashedly, as a point of departure.

On this basis, one may first observe that Lower designs his present work as the study of a metropolitan-dominated trade, and duly begins by examining the rise of the British metropolis itself. By the end of the eighteenth century, "Great Britain had become, without question, a metropolitan country, a world power" (p. 3), while by the 1860's its metropolitan status was "as vast as that Empire of hers on which the sun never set" (p. 6). Analyzing metropolitan status, the author sees its essence in "the concentration of power" (p. 7) and "power, however it arises, depends on supply for its maintenance and growth" (p. 8). Wood of course, was a basic supply need, particularly for shipbuilding and naval power in the age of wood. These underlying con-

2 Richard Rice is pursuing research into the latter and has already written on "The Wrights of Saint John: A Study of Shipbuilding and Shipowning in the Maritimes, 1839-1855", in David S. Macmillan, ed., *Canadian Business History: Selected Studies, 1497-1971* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 317-337.

cepts, hardly questionable in themselves, he then applies consistently to his grand theme, to explain how, through the timber trade, the British North America "from the farthest reaches of every stream that falls into the Atlantic", was, by the 1860's, "drawn within the orbit of British metropolitanism" (p.11). In a real way, the body of his work is simply the illustrating of the consequences of this metropolitanism for the agents in the trade and the people of the colonies, although there is nothing simple in the admirable skill with which they are worked out. Accordingly, if this book is not yet the final word on the timber trade, it is a major benchmark for studies in the metropolitan approach.

Lower has elsewhere dealt with the evolution of the metropolitan relationship in terms of "demand centres" calling on "supply areas".³ a formulation which he largely follows here. There is truth as well as neatness in this concise configuration. Above all, it expresses the dynamic, dominating ability of the metropolis to shape and exploit a hinterland. Yet it can result in neglecting another side of the relationship. Metropolitan communities are also supply centres themselves, answering, in turn, the demands of the hinterland areas for goods and services, not to mention information, ideas and social standards. The double, reciprocal, nature of the relationship must be kept in mind, even though one need not doubt that in most instances the metropolis calls the shot, amasses greater proportionate gains, and generally exercises the final decision-making power that Lower rightly sees as lying at the core of metropolitanism. Still, there may be exceptions when the hinterland does not submit to central direction (from the American Revolution to the present government of Alberta), and beyond that there are changing relations across time. Metropolises do rise and fall. Hinterlands may produce metropolitan communities of their own (as Lower recognizes), or, at the least, they may become involved in new and more complex patterns of relations, whereby an older, "outside" metropolitan power is offset by newer, "inside" metropolitan interests — linked, perhaps, to other outside metropolitan centres coming into competition for supplies or to furnish products. Without setting forth obvious examples in Canadian or other history, one may think that the demand-metropolis and supply-hinterland dichotomy is too limited and rigid a pattern to cover the varieties of historic experience. Lower's own articles suggest as much. Perhaps such a view best suits a fairly direct and early staple operation like the British-American timber trade. But even here the changes across time — the rise of colonial mercantile firms as principals rather than British agents, the growing American lumber trade, the declining authority of the British market — all indicate that even a fairly uni-linear metropolitan development tended to have more than one-sided consequences.

In general, the metropolitan approach, to be complete, must not only categorize historic processes in terms of the power, interests, and requirements

3 See "Townsmen and Countrymen: Two Ways of Life", *Dalhousie Review*, 50 (1970-71), pp. 480-487; "Metropolis and Hinterland", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 70 (1971), pp. 386-403.

of the metropolis, but also in regard to those of the hinterland, in what is essentially an interaction, a mutual dependence, and a reciprocal set of influences — whoever “wins” in the short run. That is what is both right and wrong about Professor W.L. Morton’s recent review article in these pages. He is right in stressing that “no metropolis lives of itself, it is . . . a function of its hinterland”. He is wrong in inferring that metropolitan studies necessarily express “centrality” while minimizing “regionality” — the life of the hinterland itself.⁴ As “inner” and “outer”, the concepts of metropolitan centre and hinterland region can only be made meaningful in terms of one’s relation with the other. A metropolitan pattern involves the context of its regional associations: a regional pattern, as it develops, involves at least an emerging sub-metropolitan organization within its spatial limits, as well as external relations to greater foci of metropolitan power. It is frequent, indeed, that one has to speak of a regional metropolis — the very head and heart of a region itself — and in no way is metropolitanism foreign to regionalism, as Professor Morton himself has shown in his classic volume on the regional history of Manitoba. Granted, one may fix one’s attention chiefly on a metropolitan centre or centres, without forgetting the hinterland, just as one may study aspects of regionalism without forgetting their relations to a locus of power. This is no more than saying that there can be a wide variety of perspective points on the same field. Metropolitanism by no means has to be identified with a centralist or Laurentian view. It is as regional (and as metropolitan) as St. John’s is in relation to Newfoundland, Vancouver to British Columbia, Edmonton or Winnipeg to a prairie hinterland, Halifax to a Maritime — along with all their further series of connections existing within or without the original space that may thus be delineated.

Assuredly, the greatest metropolitan centres so far exemplified in Canadian development have been Montreal or Toronto, unless one adds London, New York and so on, but it is no more centralist, or Central Canada-localist, to study their operations than to study the power relationships of Saint John and Fredericton or Vancouver and Victoria. In a proper repudiation of the view that “important” themes in Canadian development belong only to the St. Lawrence power nexus, one should not switch somehow to hold that happenings in that sphere are only Laurentian, not sufficiently regional and not quite Canadian. Regionalism, like metropolitanism, may be discerned right across Canada. Hence Professor Morton seems perfectly correct in his conclusion that the regional and the central, the metropolis and the hinterland, must always be kept in balance.

While on the subject of what it is not — if metropolitanism is not Laurentianism, neither is it to be equated with environmentalism, even as a later stage of that school of thought. It does not express the ruling power of en-

4 W.L. Morton, “Some Thoughts on Understanding Canadian History”, *Acadiensis*, II (Spring, 1973), p. 106.

vironmental forces, but the *interaction* of the environment with human organization and culture in an ecological relationship. In a general sense, a metropolitan community transmits social patterns, perceptions, traditions, technology and information to a hinterland environment, where they act and adapt in conjunction, and the results in turn react on the metropolis. Thus Europe greatly altered the world overseas by its widening penetrations, and in return was greatly altered itself. Thus the American East fostered a series of Wests, and was re-shaped in the process. Obviously, environmental factors like physiographic forms, communication paths and resource potentials enter into whatever metropolitan system may emerge. But so do ethnic inheritances and cultural values, the stage of political organization and the state of beliefs, expertise and enterprise — and one could plainly go on. Nothing requires a metropolitan conception to stress the natural environment at the expense of human behaviour and attitudes, for what is being studied is a process of societal change, whereby a metropolitan system of related communities emerges, exerts its influence, changes, and eventually declines, or is absorbed in still another pattern of metropolitan relationships.

It also follows that metropolitanism is not just developmentalism. Certainly, it is often concerned with development, the growth of hinterlands, the utilizing of their resources, the amassing of wealth and power in metropolitan centres. But growth may slow, resource-use stabilize, or hinterlands deteriorate; the metropolis itself may become a shadow of past eminence. There is no glorification here of an imperative of progress, or of the material benefits of “civilization” — merely the study of changing symbiotic patterns, whether developmental or not, but no less significant as historic phenomena for that. And, at the same time, the patterns to be observed are by no means found solely in the economic realm. Political metropolitan dominance and its challenge by hinterland movements; social, intellectual, or religious forms of metropolitan relations, their interplay and adaptations; the ties and strains between regional and central elites, the demography of the extended, outlying populations and of the centralized and urbanized — all these are aspects for examination within the metropolis-hinterland conceptual frame, quite as much as are the organization of the market, the provision of means for communication and transport, or for investment and processing.

From all this yet another point follows. It is a drastic oversimplification to treat the metropolitan concept as just the staples approach writ large. No doubt, a staples trade example offers one illustration of the workings of metropolitanism, often a very clear one, since, owing to the relative lack of complexity in the functions of a staples system, the power of the directing metropolis can stand out starkly indeed. That this was the case in the British-American timber trade, Lower's book makes fully evident. But others are more than staple resource trades, even in Canada, to which a metropolitan interpretation is applicable. Moreover, as one moves beyond the fairly prim-

itive operations of a frontier enterprise like the transmission of timber, one can find much more complex structures of metropolitan relations emerging within a hinterland itself, and far more varied developments and benefits accruing to the hinterland region. It may not have to be just the unprotected, passive recipient of outside exploitation. It can shape responses, at least qualify outside purposes, and generate activities of its own — so that the logical outcome of metropolitan influence does not have to be the ruined stump field, the ghost town or the total export of resources under an unbridled capitalism. The fact to emphasize, again, is *interaction* between metropolis and hinterland, out of which all sorts of results may come. Professor Lower has rather tended to generalize about metropolitanism from the experience of certain staple systems like those based upon forest frontiers, but this is only an aspect, almost the most sombre developmental aspect, of metropolitan-hinterland relations in Canadian history.

A frontier, after all, is a hinterland in an early stage of development. And while some frontiers may stagnate or even decline, more usually they have evolved as populated, variegated, and enduring hinterlands; the southern Ontario hinterland of Toronto has not been the Upper Canada frontier for quite a time. Frontiers loom large in the fairly brief span of Canadian history, but though highly important to that history, they are a passing phase in hinterland-metropolitan patterns that long continue. Thus, for all the significance of the frontier, American history did not come to an end with the passing of Turner's free land. Accordingly, metropolitanism must be seen as a persistent phenomenon, clearly evident in frontier stages and in the simpler staple trading conditions of under-developed areas, but in no way to be restricted as an interpretative approach to the terms set by those special stages or conditions.

Since the foregoing has largely declared what metropolitanism is not, let me in conclusion be a bit more positive as to what it is. In essence, the metropolis-hinterland relation is a particularly influential case of that classic relationship that runs through history, that of town to country, of the concentrated human community to the diffused or extended community. When seen in terms of metropolis and frontier, it is, so to speak, the restatement of the extremes in this relationship: of "town" at the highest scale of concentration in numbers, power, and services, and of "country" at its most dispersed and least developed stage of occupation and utilization. Metropolitan studies thus properly involve both urban and "rural" areas (in Canada the latter has to cover fishing, lumbering and mining regions as well as agricultural lands). But the crux of the matter always is the interconnection of the two sides. Neither the city nor the countryside is examined for its own sake, but in respect to the impinging of one upon the other. To repeat, the great city or metropolis is studied in the context of the hinterland; the outlying region in relation to the metropolitan centre. The result is neither urban nor regional

history, but a combination of aspects of both. And the result is not the key to all history, or even to all Canadian history, but rather an approach to the interpretation of some of its significant themes.

Accordingly, I would disclaim and deny a metropolitan "thesis" or "hypothesis" or any other such ennobling and entangling designation. Metropolitanism is merely an approach to certain broad areas of historic experience, a way of looking at, or picking out, phenomena that built up cities and regions in Canada and conditioned the lives of the network of interdependent, interacting communities, concentrated and dispersed, all across the Canadian domain. It involves the location of decision-making power and the perception of identities, the communal processes of co-operation and complementation, of rivalry and resistance. It has strong geographic and economic associations, but need have no less concern with political and social organization and ideas, individual outlook and initiative or family, group and class behaviour. Fundamentally, it is a social formulation, an inquiry into social history. It may never explain Mackenzie King or the meaning of the Conquest, but within its own bounds it promises much, especially when it already has substantial foundation to build upon — such as those so well provided by Arthur Lower in his latest work.

J. M. S. CARELESS

BEAVERBROOK: THE CANADIAN ADVENTURESS

It goes almost without saying that A.J.P. Taylor's *Beaverbrook* is the most comprehensive, engaging, and authoritative life of Beaverbrook yet or likely to be written.¹ Taking the book's strengths — the author's unrestricted access to the Beaverbrook papers, his mastery of twentieth-century British politics his genius as a writer of narrative history, his empathy with his subject — as no more than we expected from Mr. Taylor on Beaverbrook, there is considerable room for comment on his failure to explain a central problem, perhaps the central problem, in the interpretation of Beaverbrook's career. "Many people regarded him as an indescribably wicked, an evil man". Taylor comments. "I am totally at a loss to explain this" (p. xv).

Part of the author's bafflement stems from his correct and important realization that Max Aitken the Canadian financier was not an unprincipled free-booter who looted corporations, held up the Canadian people to tribute, betrayed his business associates and then sailed off to England to spend his treasure and bury his past. For all of Mr. Taylor's substantial ignorance of Canadian business and politics (the C.P.R. did not support the Liberal Party and was certainly not "on the side of the farmers against the industrialists and financiers" (p. 35); Sandford Fleming was not a father of Confederation:

1 A.J.P. Taylor. *Beaverbrook* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1972).