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## Review Essays/Notes critiques

# The New History of Atlantic Canada

THE CENTRIFUGAL STRAINS ON THE Canadian federation have been consistently emphasized in most analyses of the last 25 years of Canadian development. Nationalism in Quebec, regionalism in the Prairie and Atlantic provinces, British Columbia being British Columbia, have probably never been so persistent. Nor have predictions of either the collapse or the radical reformulation of Confederation ever been so confident as during the Trudeau-Mulroney years. A referendum in Quebec in 1980 and another in the whole country in 1992, the emergence of regionalist/separatist parties such as the Parti Québécois, the Reform Party, the Parti Acadien and the Confederation of Regions Party, to say nothing of the intensification of class, ethnic and gender issues, all suggested a near-fatal instability in Canadian society. Yet, after 25 years of debate, very few fundamental institutional changes have taken place: increased recognition of the French language, a charter which has broadened our concept of human rights, a grudgingly accepted multiculturalism and for women, at least of the middle class, some slow progress towards equality. Poverty, social inequality, regional disparity and the degraded state of Canada's native peoples remain largely unchanged. Whether we contrast Bob Rae, student radical, with Bob Rae, NDP premier, Brian Peckford with Clyde Wells on federal-provincial relations, or even René Lévesque's rumpled suit with Jacques Parizeau's St. James Street elegance, a new mood is evident. Everywhere, not just in the Atlantic region, "the illusions and realities of progress" have led to a "sharpening of the sceptical edge".

The explanation for these developments is complex, but one part of it is surely that for all the emphasis on differences during recent decades, Canadians from all regions and linguistic groups have, in fact, been growing more alike, at least in aspiration if not in reality. Those who have not yet achieved that reality — equality with other Canadians — either as individuals (women), or as collectivities (the Atlantic region), and even those who are marginalized (native people) — continue to struggle for a lifestyle equal to that attained by the most fortunate. The secular forces of modernism, those abstractions dubbed industrialism, urbanism, technology and mass electronic communications, have not created a "global village", but they have certainly "homogenized", to use the term favoured by George Grant, and they continue to homogenize societies such as Canada.

Recent historical writing in Canada has, often unintentionally, emphasized this trend even while focusing on parts — "regions" — rather than on the whole of Canada. Indeed, one of the sweet ironies in the arid debate between "nationalists" and "limited identitarians" on historiography is that neither side appears to recognize that class, ethnicity and gender describe what groups of Canadians have in common, while "nationalism" most often provokes divisions — "regionalism"! Take the case of Quebec. In the past 20 years historians of that province have almost totally lost interest in the topics that animated Lionel Groulx and his school — language, religion, nation — and have taken up those issues that have fascinated historians in most of the rest of the world — urbanization, class, capitalist development, state formation and gender relations. Quebec, in a work such as the *Histoire du Québec contemporain* (1979) by

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René Durocher, Paul-André Linteau and Jean-Claude Robert, has become what Michel Brunet always denied: a "normal" society where "la lutte des races" and "la survivance" have given way to "la lutte des classes" and "le rattrappage". So, too, Gerald Friesen's *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (1984), though naturally emphasizing those developments central to the region, makes no real attempt to elevate the west to the status of a "distinct" society. In most respects the work is much less "regionalist" in spirit than, for example, W.L. Morton's *Manitoba: A History* (1957). *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation,* edited by E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise (Toronto/Fredericton, University of Toronto Press/Acadiensis Press, 1993) fits comfortably into this historiographical context.

This welcome volume, the work of 13 accomplished students of the history of the Atlantic Provinces, is the culmination of a set of social and intellectual developments which first manifested themselves in the 1960s. These developments are well-described by Della Stanley and John Reid in their analyses of the 1960s and 1970s. University expansion and the concomitant growth of the academic profession accompanied a more general cultural flowering — painting, music, fiction, poetry and drama — in the Atlantic Provinces as elsewhere in Canada. As students in the region completed undergraduate training they often moved elsewhere for further study (7 of the 13 contributors followed this pattern) and returned home to practise their profession. There they joined scholars "from away" interested in the history of the region (three contributors) and the occasional outsider who had come to the Atlantic Provinces for advanced study (at least two contributors). Scholarly interests and ambitions (vertical social mobility or, as we academics prefer, "promotion and tenure") combined to encourage expanded graduate programmes, scholarly conferences focused on the region and scholarly journals. *Acadiensis*, under the editorship of Phillip Buckner, one of those "from away", commenced publication in 1971. Those developments, and that publication, were necessary preludes to the appearance of this first, full-scale, history of the Atlantic region since 1867.

Like much else in the cultural revival of the Atlantic provinces in the 1960s and 1970s — and here the parallel with cultural revivals elsewhere in Canada during the same period is striking — *Acadiensis* and the new generation of historians both contributed to and benefited from the developing regional consciousness. (I well remember being introduced — laundered? — at an Atlantic Canada Studies Conference as someone who, although from Toronto, actually subscribed to *Acadiensis* from the beginning!) But that regional consciousness was markedly ambiguous. Formulated by people who had been "away" or were "from away", its goal was to create in the region what already existed "away" — to achieve equality with central Canada without being there. One example of this ambiguity — and its benefits — is found in the acknowledgements pages of *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* where thanks are tendered not only for individual grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada but also for a "generous grant" from the Council of Maritime Premiers, "which was then matched with funds from the Canadian Studies Directorate of the federal department of the secretary of state". *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, then, might be seen as a typical example of the type of federalism from which we have all benefited since the 1960s (though the Mulroney government has done its best to undermine it): a heavily subsidized, labour-intensive exercise in trying to

understand ourselves. In this case, at least, both the subsidy and the labour have paid off handsomely.

Taken as a whole, these 13 essays, plus a prologue and an epilogue, provide a thorough, detailed, well-presented history of the Atlantic Provinces since 1867. The chapters are grouped into four sections: "Consolidating the Union, 1867-1890", "Transforming Horizons, 1890-1920", "Living with Disparity, 1920-1950" and, finally, "The Atlantic Provinces, 1950-1980" (this last title is oddly flat and unrevealing). Each author tackles ten years. This rigid, somewhat unimaginative, decadal division is not explained. As every historian knows, such divisions, even over longer periods ("the nineteenth century"), are arbitrary, sometimes disfiguringly so. Developments which have their roots in one decade often culminate or disappear in others. Such divisions almost inevitably result in repetition or, when authors approach a subject from contrasting perspectives, interpretations which may not mesh. This volume has been remarkably successful in escaping these problems, though there are some blemishes. For example, the treatment of women, native people and black citizens of the region, while commendable in its coverage, is often truncated, even "bitty", sometimes seeming like an obligatory paragraph inserted to fulfill an editorial requirement in an otherwise flowing narrative. A decade is simply not enough to assess, for example, the changing status of women; too often what is provided is a series of "firsts" — first woman university graduate, judge, mayor or senator. The treatment of the Acadian community sometimes suffers similarly from truncation. On page 400, for instance, the new nationalist movement is impressively described, but necessarily left hanging as the 1960s turn into the 1970s and another author takes over. (In passing, I should note with regret that not a single Acadian is included among the contributors, and 395 pages pass before a word of French is quoted). So, too, there is repetition. Larry McCann and Colin Howell, citing the same sources (T.W. Acheson, James Frost and L.D. McCann), repeat the same story of business centralization in Montreal and Toronto. Carman Miller and Margaret Conrad cite the same 1949 passage from *The Maritime Advocate and Busy East*; since Miller found it in an earlier Conrad publication, she presumably holds the rights, though it does fall outside of her decade. Howell, on page 178, confesses puzzlement at Acadian population increase, a phenomenon quite adequately explained by McCann on page 139. (I noted only one error — on page 514 Frank McKenna was elected a year early; the correct date is on page 519, however). Finally, the difficulty of the decadal division is most obviously revealed by ornery Newfoundland, Unevenly integrated in the first nine chapters, the country/province is given a fine but separate chapter covering its history before Confederation, thus interrupting the chronological flow of the book.

These, however, are minor problems. Once the decision to divide the subject into 13 equal parts (Newfoundland being more equal than the others) is accepted, the book is something of a triumph. While each author was asked to provide full coverage of her (three) or his (ten) assigned decade, giving "centre stage" to "workers, women, ethnic and other groups", no attempt was made to impose interpretive or ideological conformity, though the "spectrum from liberal to neo-marxian" is not enormous. Nevertheless, there is a notable compatibility among the authors' approaches and enough agreement on general lines of interpretation to transform what might have been merely a series of useful essays into a fairly well-integrated whole — a book. The

editors hope it is "publicly accessible", by which I suppose they mean "readable". It is.

The book starts rather abruptly for the simple reason that the decision to begin in 1867 left little room to examine the background — the "Prologue" covers too much too briefly. Without a more substantial background the struggle over Confederation is difficult to explain convincingly. Both Muise and Buckner, who continues the Confederation story into the 1870s, make some rather odd remarks about Canadian federalism. Muise, for example, claims that "the Quebec Resolutions did not so much create a federation as consolidate the activities of a number of separate colonial entities and invent a new level of government to carry out functions and deal with issues that the new central government preferred to avoid " (p. 34). Since the "new level of government" — though in a precise sense all levels were "new" — was the "central government", this statement is extremely confusing. Nor, I think, does Buckner's claim that "the majority of Maritimers had never opposed the idea of Confederation, only the unpalatable terms imposed upon the region by the Quebec Conference" (p. 48) stand examination. If he had substituted "union with the Canadas" for "Confederation" (it being, in essence, the same as the Quebec Resolutions), the statement would have been more defensible, though objection should still be taken to the claim that the Quebec Conference had power to "impose" anything on anyone, as Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island demonstrated.

If the two opening chapters give the book a somewhat slow start, things really take off with Judith Fingard's account of the 1880s entitled "Paradoxes of Progress". As a practising social historian, with a special interest in the "dark side" of her region, she skilfully weaves the prescribed elements of class, gender and ethnicity into an essay that exudes empathy for her subject. Nor does she miss a beat when she moves into a lucid discussion of economic development and political activity. Her final summing up — "The Character of Regional Consciousness", which emphasizes themes of fragmentation and unity, nostalgia and optimism — effectively sets out the themes that repeatedly return as *leitmotifs* in nearly every succeeding chapter. Fingard's stylishly written synthesis sets a standard that is challenged only by Ian McKay and John Reid, though others come close.

Larry McCann most obviously picks up on the theme of fragmentation. (He is also responsible for the excellence of the maps, while Bill Parenteau selected the numerous revealing pictures). He carefully delineates the impact of urban and industrial change on "the shreds and patches of Confederation". McCann is more interested than other contributors in large categories such as "fragmentation", "metropolitanism" and "dependence", and these abstractions sometimes obscure his story. His own figures suggest that his insistence on urban-industrial change may be exaggerated at the expense of rural development, but the chapter is a solid one.

Colin Howell and Ian McKay develop the themes of urbanism, industrialism and progressivism. Their two turbulent decades, 1900-20, were for Atlantic Canadians, as for people elsewhere, a time of great expectations. Economic growth combined with the optimistic spirit of the age — to say nothing of crass boosterism — to create both the reality and the illusion that part of the century that belonged to Canada also belonged to the Atlantic region. Underlying, even contradicting, this confident spirit were the harsh realities of inequality and conflict so graphically described in these pages.

Particularly noteworthy is the way each author integrates religion, especially the social gospel, into their account. Howell catches the spirit of the age with a marvellous remark by a Presbyterian woman who insisted that "all the paraphernalia of modern science are accessories towards this end [the Lord's work]; telephones, telegraphs, submarine cables, steam, electricity, rapid transit, are all bringing the world nearer to Christ" (p. 155). No hint of that now famous evangelical spirit nurtured by the Pictou Academy here, or anywhere else in the book, for that matter!

McKay develops his analysis of the social, economic and cultural conjuncture that coincided with the years of the Great War into a superbly written assessment of these pivotal years in the history of the Atlantic region, years when the great hopes of the Laurier boom slipped away slowly into decades of dependence and depression. His brief but arresting account of the Halifax Explosion, his sensitive treatment of postwar labour conflict and his perceptive, balanced account of the politics of the period concludes with an elegiac coda on the region's "last years of abundant hope". Taken together the Howell and McKay essays will force Canadian historians to rethink the opening decades of this century in ways that will more fully involve the Atlantic Provinces in "the nation transformed".

David Frank and E.R. Forbes, already established authorities on the interwar years, have nevertheless provided new material and new insights into the two decades, 1920-40, in which the dreams of prewar boosters turned to nightmares. The shift in economic collapse and social desperation of the 1930s and the negative impact of the outmigration of increasing numbers of talented people are all carefully described. Frank, not unexpectedly, is exceptionally strong on labour issues in the mining industry in the 1920s while Forbes' chapter is especially notable for his coverage of religion. He, unlike some contributors, realizes that religion means more than the social gospel and the Antigonish movement.

With Carman Miller's chapter on the 1940s the focus of the book shifts perceptibly. Where the first eight chapters — especially chapters 3 to 8 — concentrate on internal developments and conflicts within the Atlantic societies, a more "regional" perspective now takes over with an emphasis on relations between federal and provincial governments, between centre and periphery. This shift is not total; internal conflicts — class, ethnicity and gender — continue to receive attention, but there is a shift. With Miller's chapter the age of what might be called "dependence" is entered. Miller alerts us to this transition by the very awkwardness of his opening statement: "The absence of a strong sense of regional identity proved a serious liability during the 1940s when war and insecurity bred a highly directive federalism that banished the Depression, contributed to the military victory in Europe, recast Canada's social-security system, and re-shaped the political economy of Atlantic Canada" (p. 306). If the implication is that a "strong sense of regional identity" would have prevented or even hindered those developments, it is not hard to understand why "regionalism" has sometimes had a bad press — even in the Atlantic Provinces. But the point, so oddly expressed here, is that the imperatives of wartime planning subordinated the Atlantic region's political economy to the centre to an extent that has made dependence a virtually irreversible condition. Miller's description of the roots of this relationship and of the "complicity" of Maritimers in it is clear and usually dispassionate. He, like one or two other contributors to the book, seems a little naive about what federal ministers from the

region might have achieved if they had placed the "regional interest" ahead of the "national interest", or at least ahead of party interest. So, too, some readers will wish that he had put a little more flesh and blood — and documentation — on "the free market's own centralist economic strategies" and "the friends in the cabinet and civil service" who were its handmaidens.

Margaret Conrad and Della Stanley, following James Hiller's informative survey of Newfoundland's entry into Confederation (though I wish he had explained the opposition of the Catholic church to the Fishermen's Protective Union), pick up from Miller. Each in her own way effectively analyses the efforts made by provincial governments to find ways of lifting the region up to a position of at least near-equality with the favoured members of the federation. Conrad is especially sure-footed on the politics of the "Atlantic Revolution" of the 1950s and also provides one of the most compelling accounts of the condition of women question. (She also offers an unexpected insight into regional culture when she writes that "the birth control pill served as an antidote to the emerging sexual revolution" (p. 383). Elsewhere in Canada, perhaps especially in Quebec, it was viewed as an aid to that revolution!) Stanley is also good on politics, on the nationalism of the Acadians and on student unrest. (Her account of the Strax affair reminded me that in 1969 I unreluctantly declined a student nomination for the presidency of the University of New Brunswick — even before I subscribed to *Acadiensis*!) Stanley's essay shares with some others a thinness in the cultural area. It is not so much discussion of the commercialization of nostalgia which Ian McKay has so brilliantly exposed that would have been useful, but more on the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and less repetition of the same well-known names — Lawren Harris, Alex Colville and Jack Humphrey (whose work is on the cover and whose name appears several times in the text, but is absent from the skimpy index).

Having said that, it must now be emphasized that culture is one of many strong points in the final full-scale essay — John Reid's superlative "The 1970s: Sharpening the Sceptical Edge". Here virtually all of the threads drawn from earlier chapters are woven together into a tapestry that reveals a region that has survived the highs and lows of the promises and failures of the postwar years. The condition of the various components of the Atlantic economy are clearly laid out, the politics of "development and disparity" dissected with a sharp scalpel, the heightened tensions between francophones and anglophones evenhandedly assessed, while the continuing plight of African Canadians and native Canadians is underlined. In this chapter Joey Smallwood departs kicking and screaming, Richard Hatfield arrives in a Bricklin exuding peculiar odours, and the Brothers and Sisters of Cornelius Howatt defend the virtue of Prince Edward Island. Above all, Reid fully captures the mood of a region where, for the years that were to follow, the "often-turbulent experiences of the 1970s provided a better preparation than the uncritical belief in ready progress that had innocently lingered in the region as it entered the decade" (p. 504). An exemplary piece of historical synthesis.

E.R. Forbes' task in writing an "Epilogue", like that of Del Muise in the "Prologue", was a difficult assignment, especially since it had to follow Reid's vigorous chapter. Where the "Prologue" is thin, covering too much, the "Epilogue" is too restrictive, concentrating almost entirely on the impact of neo-conservative fiscal and economic policies on the Atlantic region. Here "the ordinary people — workers,

women, ethnic and other groups" who enlivened so many earlier pages are nearly shut out. Another edition will allow for a fuller, more balanced treatment of the ugly eighties.

And my own epilogue? First, this book is an excellent one. Forbes and Muise, the major-domos, deserve high praise and extensive gratitude, for persevering with what must sometimes have seemed a life sentence. So, too, every contributor has sweated as is always required in writing good history. All have done that and at least three have produced essays that are at least equal to anything comparable in Canadian historiography. Secondly, the original research and the careful thought contained in this study will necessitate much reconsideration by historians of Canada concerning the relationship of the history of the Atlantic region to the interpretation of Canadian historical development. The central message that *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* bears, I think, is that many of the developments familiar to historians of other regions — Ontario, Quebec, the Prairies — have also dominated the history of the Atlantic region. Rather than a place of placid regional homogeneity, the Atlantic Provinces have been the scene of fragmentation and conflict.

Yet this is certainly not to argue that the Atlantic region, any more than Quebec or the Prairies, in attempting to find an accommodation with the challenges of 20th-century capitalist culture, is nothing more than a pale, poor replica of central Canada. The distinctive quality of life in the Atlantic region remains and emerges subtly from the pages of this rich new study. It lies, at least in part, in that repeated shift from optimism, innocent or otherwise, to scepticism, fatalistic or otherwise, that characterizes so much of the history of the region. In the last analysis, the people of the Atlantic Provinces recognize "soft sawder" when they see it though, as Sam Slick knew, it sometimes takes a while.

RAMSAY COOK