

Another Look at *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*

Malcolm MacLeod

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Another Look at *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*

THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT BOOK on regional history since the publication, 30 years ago, of W.S. MacNutt's *The Atlantic Provinces: The Emergence of Colonial Society, 1712-1857*. Edited by E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto/Fredericton, University of Toronto Press/Acadiensis Press, 1993) is a polished and professional treatment of the subjects it presents and emanates from the same intellectual centre as the earlier work. MacNutt was a long-time faculty member at the University of New Brunswick. This book too — while committee-bred with two co-editors and a dozen contributors — is a project whose most influential backers and shapers are situated at that same campus. What can we say about the Fredericton scholars? They cannot be given enough credit for their dedication, enterprise and productivity. Using *Acadiensis* and other tools, they have done more than any other Atlantic area group to promote serious local studies and make regional history respectable. One advantage of their location — away from the coast, tending to the continental — is that it encourages an alert look in all directions. There is also a disadvantage: Fredericton is a long way from Newfoundland. On this occasion at least, the work produced shows that Newfoundland was well over their horizon, beyond easy ken.

The book's structure and table of contents flash early signals that the editors found integrating Newfoundland into their history to be a difficult conundrum. They wrestled with the puzzle for a while, one supposes, then gave up without solving it. The basic scheme is a separate chapter on each decade from 1860 to 1980. Everything starts fine. A brief prologue ("The Atlantic Colonies before Confederation") and the chapter on the 1860s — both by co-editor Del Muise — soundly treat the region as a single entity. Nova Scotia and Newfoundland were the oldest, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island more recent, colonies of European settlement. All four jurisdictions were following similar patterns of social, economic and political development. Next, the most amazing thing happens. All detailed discussion and explanation of conditions in Newfoundland drops from the text for the next eight chapters (300 pages, about 60 per cent of the whole book).

This prolonged exclusion appears to be a penalty imposed for conduct on Newfoundland's part deemed to be unbecoming: that is, saying no to Confederation. It is as if a tidal wave had washed over the eastern third of the region. During those eight chapters, the 1870s to the 1940s, there are only a half-dozen fragmentary references to events in Newfoundland. Such bits of flotsam confirm that life there somehow continued, though submerged. Numerous opportunities for showing how Newfoundland and other parts of the region shared similar experiences are not seized upon, probably not even perceived.

For example: *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* explains how in 1885 the Salvation Army, spreading eastward from Ontario, first "opened fire" in Halifax and Saint John (p. 111). It does not mention that missionary work in Newfoundland, similarly sponsored by Toronto, was part of the same campaign. Again, when the disastrous August gale of 1927 demolished the Lunenburg fishing fleet, no notice is taken of how large a percentage of those lost — nearly one-quarter — were foreign fishermen, that is, Newfoundlanders, carried as crewmen on Canadian boats (p. 250).

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By 1933, debt charges consumed 35 per cent of government revenue in Nova Scotia, 55 per cent in New Brunswick (p. 275). The book does not show how Newfoundland, devoting 65 per cent of revenue to this purpose, was at one extreme of a regional continuum, stationed closer to New Brunswick than were New Brunswick's Confederation partners. During the Second World War, the armed forces of Canada established administrative/operational structures that made Halifax headquarters for the entire region. *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, of course, is unaware there were RCAF bases at Gander and Torbay as well as Chatham and Summerside; or that St. John's became the second-largest Canadian naval base. The range, even of these few examples, is striking. During the period from 1870 to 1950 the Maritimes and Newfoundland opened up to social influences emanating from Central Canada, experienced interchange of people, adopted a common defence posture and went through similar trends in public finance. By its overall concept, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* ensures that no notice will be taken of the fairly thorough-going integration of Newfoundland and the Maritimes that occurred without benefit of constitutional union.

The book's final chapters, dealing with the 1950s and subsequent decades, see Newfoundland once again restored as a proper subject for analysis. As if to compensate for decades of disregard, this part of the work is prefaced with a surprise chapter. In "Newfoundland Confronts Canada, 1867 - 1949" — inaptly titled, since there are scant elements of confrontation — James Hiller presents an expert but rushed summary of what had been transpiring in Newfoundland while it stayed aloof from the mainland constitutional experiment. As this chapter is about the same length as the others, Newfoundland's experience during its misconduct penalty — the Atlantis decades, 1870s to 1940s — qualifies for about one-third the length and depth of discussion that is given to other regional jurisdictions. The poor judgement in this disparity is emphasized by the fact that the make-up chapter on Newfoundland 1867 - 1949 is presented as part of the book's part 4, "The Atlantic Provinces, 1950 - 1980". This is crazy chronology that cannot have made much sense, even in Fredericton.

Aside from the disappointingly careless, contemptuous way in which Newfoundland is presented, this is an exemplary work of history. Superbly strong contributors were chosen — 13 scholars, mostly Maritimers teaching at Maritime universities (three at UNB, one or two from each of Saint Mary's, Acadia, Dalhousie, etc.) plus a few expatriates now scattered to other parts of Canada. The quality of their work, each given a different decade to dissect, is very great. This is the long-awaited and richly-rewarding synthesis of all the excellent history that theses, articles and conferences of the past quarter-century have produced. Sixty-eight pages of notes show what an impeccably scholarly approach has been taken and reinforce the credentials of the book's authors. Not only has this band of writers mastered a voluminous literature, but to an important extent they also produced that literature themselves. The period before the First World War shows the greatest joint expertise. One-third of the notes for Muise's chapter on the 1860s contain references to his own work and that of five others. Chapters on the 1870s and 1880s each cite seven of the authors, and Colin Howell, discussing 1900 to 1910, refers to eight of the group. Throughout the book, co-editor Ernie Forbes' work on the contributions

of federal policy to regional disparity and on Maritime protests receives the most citations: 32. The most ubiquitous expert is Ian McKay (formerly at Dalhousie and Saint Mary's, now Queen's). His articles on the labour movement and on regional culture are cited 24 times by nine of the other contributors. While most chapters are smooth integrations of all the scholarly work on aspects of regional development that have been studied, several also incorporate major elements of original research that enrich and extend the synthesis. In five chapters, one-third or more of the notes refer to newspapers and other primary sources. In two cases — McKay's chapter on 1910 to 1920 and John Reid's on the 1970s — more than half the notes are in this category.

Despite the multiplicity of authors, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* exhibits a smooth continuity. Important issues raised in one decade are very satisfyingly followed up by other writers dealing with later times. The experience of disadvantaged or marginal groups is a good example. In early chapters Del Muise first probes the inequality of women, Phillip Buckner the conditions of francophones and native people and Judith Fingard the ingrained racism against which Maritime Blacks struggled. Subsequent authors then continually update us on the shifting fortunes of these groups. The significance of labour organization in resource industries is well-traced, from the quick impact of Nova Scotia's Provincial Workmen's Association after its founding in the 1870s to the radical reorganization of collective bargaining associated with emergence of the Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers' Union a century later. Larry McCann's chapter on the 1890s narrates the falling under control of Central Canadian capital of seven cotton-textile enterprises whose establishment had been thoroughly discussed by Fingard as an "instructive example of the flawed consumer-oriented industrial strategy of the 1880s" (pp. 84, 127-9).

In addition to sound expertise and satisfying continuity, the book features very able writing. Despite varied backgrounds and different interests, all authors exemplify dedication to the same firm rules of Canadian scholarly writing: elevated, precise vocabulary; a high standard of clarity; long sentences and — no levity. Key elements of first-class history are so consistently present it becomes nearly impossible to choose the strongest chapter. Ian McKay wins the reader's thanks for daring to break the unwritten injunction against humour while spinning some anecdotes about the First World War: "The best way of improving wretched canteen provisions, one group of Nova Scotia soldiers discovered, was to eject the proprietor and set his canteen on fire....It was far harder to overlook the evidence that sharp-eyed horse traders had sold the government lame, broken horses for military duties — evidence that was unkind to the reputation of the government, the horse traders, and the poor horses alike" (pp. 214, 216). Towards the end of the book we finally reach a writer who crafts language with as much imagination as exactness. John Reid tells how Moncton's new city hall, built with Acadian financing, was opened in 1971 (p. 480). French-free ceremonies "managed dramatically to snatch ill-will from the jaws of reconciliation". Conservative politicians embraced numerous progressive causes in the 1970s, but Reid wonders "Whether the party had a real moral right to the conversions it professed, or whether it was simply strip-mining attractive campaign issues" (p. 503). All the chapters are carefully organized, although the

editors do allow a few authors to omit section headings which make the others even easier to study and follow.

My favourite chapter — not everyone need agree — is Margaret Conrad's magnificent essay on the 1950s, "The Decade of Development". What is so very satisfying here is the manner in which she does what previous authors have resolutely avoided: she puts Newfoundland alongside the Maritime Provinces to see what can be learned. The result is brilliant and illuminating juxtapositions (having nothing to do with the fact that all parts of the region have now joined the same state). They reveal how similar were the forces at work right across the region, always one, now recognized. Conrad gathers her evidence into categories. Monuments to the ambitions of engineers include the Angus L. Macdonald Bridge, the Canso Causeway and Labrador City. Occupational disasters: bumps in the coal at Springhill, Nova Scotia and carcinogens in the fluorspar of St. Lawrence, Newfoundland. Writers looking fondly backwards: Will R. Bird and Ted Russell. Media creatures: the two Dons, Messer and Jamieson.

The book's nine dozen illustrations are particularly well-chosen, adding interest and information to the text. Some are unexpected: young men and women falling for each other at a Halifax ice dance ("skating ball") in the 1880s; a 1911 university ladies' hockey team, UNB of course; the Bricklin sports car campaigning in the 1974 New Brunswick election with both its gull-like doors unfurled (pp. 107, 185, 469). Other shots are so obligatory it would be an un-Maritime crime to omit them: all the ships, rusty rescuers of Europe, waiting in Bedford Basin during wartime convoy days; the Bluenose, not the familiar schooner that stopped on the dime but a livelier craft, heeling starboard and throwing up spray; Angus L. Macdonald's posthumous hundred pipers skirling across the new roadway linking Cape Breton and the Antigonish shore in 1955. Even at this safe remove we instinctively plug fingers into ears, while grinning at the editors' best caption: "At a ceremony attended by thousands of grateful mainlanders, the Canso causeway was opened, connecting the rest of Canada to Cape Breton" (pp. 313, 267, 406). Numerous cartoons are included, enlivening the general appreciation that our ancestors were actually real people. There are also 17 maps, less effective. Studied and intricate, they prove for what it may be worth that today's cartographers can indeed jam a tremendous amount of data into a small space, but will discourage all but the most determined readers from trying to puzzle out their messages.

The careful hands of the editors have blended all these images, research, prose styles and expertise into a pleasing whole. Misspellings, typographical errors and accidental repetitions have been minimized, and only in the chapter on the 1960s is there any particular tendency towards errors of fact. There the Nova Scotia Technical College is grouped with trade schools such as Holland College (as if it were not already 50 years old and of higher, degree-granting status), and we learn about "The industrialization of the Atlantic provinces, which began in the 1950s..." — wording at least misleading. In this context Corner Brook is mentioned right alongside the new superport at Port Hawkesbury, as if the Newfoundland paper town had not already experienced its time of greatest development and growth well before the Second World War (pp. 443-5). Such little mistakes are of no great consequence, especially when statements technically true can deceive much worse. In one of the

sections devoted to the improving status of women, for example, we learn that Gladys Porter of Kentville “became the region’s first woman to be elected to a provincial legislature” in 1960 (p. 390). Actually, back in a 1930 by-election Helena Squires had become the member for Lewisporte district, Notre Dame Bay. At that time, of course, the Newfoundland House of Assembly was not a “provincial” legislature, so it seems not to count.

The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation, then, is a comprehensive and careful survey of the three Maritime Provinces, with Newfoundland awkwardly appended, or as often as not ignored. It makes no claim to be a history of the Atlantic Region. Usually, it is futile or even unfair to complain that authors should have written a different book than the one produced. In this case we can complain, however, because it is clear the promoters of *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* considered dealing fully with the whole region, but decided against it. Their thinking is explained in the Preface:

For most of the period of this history...Newfoundland was not part of Confederation; its perspective and that of Canada’s three Maritime provinces diverged sharply after the latter entered the union. Since Newfoundland’s entry into Confederation in 1949, areas of shared interest have re-emerged....The distinctiveness of its tradition should not be underestimated (pp. x-xii).

There are two mistakes being made here. One is the assumption that Newfoundland and Eastern Canada had no “areas of shared interest” before 1949. This is far from true. From the 1890s Canadian banks monopolized the financial industry in the smaller country and Canada’s dollar became the currency of Newfoundland: monetary union. The same vertically-integrated Canadian capital that dominated coal and steel production on Cape Breton also promoted large-scale iron mining and urbanization in Conception Bay: industrial integration. Newfoundland joined Canada’s meteorological system, taking forecasts from Toronto, in 1909. Entering regional arrangements sometimes more readily than other jurisdictions did, Newfoundland helped to finance and/or govern schools for the blind and the deaf at Halifax and the Nova Scotia Technical College. After 1930 the region’s four governments set a single school-leaving standard through operation of the “Common examining board of the Maritime provinces and Newfoundland”. St. John’s badgered Ottawa over tariffs being charged on the Canadian National system as far east as North Sydney, in messages so blunt and aggrieved they could have been written by premiers engaged in the Maritime Rights crusade, or by Ernie Forbes himself. By the 1930s branches of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, the United Church of Canada and Canadian Junior Red Cross were familiar in Newfoundland. Banks, money, heavy industry, meteorology, special education services, high school curriculum and standards, freight rates, various common social institutions: these all add up to numerous shared interests linking Newfoundland and the Maritimes, long before 1949.

Secondly, there is the unspecified assertion that Newfoundland’s traditions are distinctive. Some are, some are not. Newfoundland like the Maritimes is a

community resulting from European immigration, mostly British (and Irish) with some French. Religions and religious rivalries were similar. Newfoundland never experienced American/Loyalist influences as the mainland provinces did. All parts of the Atlantic Region have resource-based economies powerfully influenced by seaward opportunities, not always the same ones (Newfoundland pursued seals; Bay of Fundy, scallops). In Newfoundland and the Maritimes economic diversification was hard-won, halting, very incomplete and subject to exploitation by the same sets of outsiders. Political norms everywhere emanate from British parliamentary tradition.

We find therefore that *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* does not present compelling or even well-founded reasons for hiving Newfoundland off from the main story in the way it does. It would surely have been more reasonable to make this book an Atlantic regional history, from these considerations:

(1) From the mid-19th century to the late 20th, developments in Newfoundland and the Maritimes responded for the most part to the same array of forces. Influences that shaped the Maritimes are well discussed in the book: modernization; technology; capitalist industrialization with its attendant urbanization, class formation, labour struggles and dependence on outside investment; increased attention to education, welfare and minority rights; electioneering motivated sometimes by policy, more often by partisanship; and federal policy that injured or aided economic development. All of these forces, except for the last one, operated in Newfoundland in approximate synchronization with what happened in the Maritimes, leading to very similar outcomes.

(2) Omitting Newfoundland from the account while it remained outside Confederation puts entirely too much weight upon the merely political/constitutional aspect of things. It used to be thought that pretty well all Canadian history had to be constitutional history. We hoped we had proceeded beyond such a narrow view. Despite the attention it pays to women's studies, socio-economic aspects and other advances in scholarship, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* shows that at heart its planners still harbour the old whiggish standard.

(3) Treating the Atlantic Region as one unit provides a splendid opportunity to gauge the real impact and meaning of Confederation, by comparing the experience of communities that joined, with Newfoundland which did not. In terms of laboratory experiment, Newfoundland can be a "control" helping us to realize whether trends we might attribute to Confederation were instead pushed along chiefly by other causes — most likely modern technology or capitalist industrialization. In order to promote maximum learning developments that were, and those that were not, influenced by Confederation, need to be brought into the closest possible juxtaposition and equally probed. If this approach had been taken in *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, it would have added significantly to our understanding of the Maritimes, and Confederation, as well as Newfoundland. Unfortunately, the planners of the volume let the opportunity entirely slip past.

Fifteen years ago, in his article "Economic Growth in the Atlantic Region, 1880 to 1940", David Alexander called upon historians to treat the whole region as a

single entity, and “bridge the Cabot Strait”.¹ Patricia Thornton’s “The Problem of Out-Migration from Atlantic Canada, 1871-1921” gave an excellent example of what can be done.² Through the 1980s I published several items stressing Newfoundland’s pre-1949 links with Eastern Canada, summing it all up in the title, *Nearer than Neighbours*.³ At a Fredericton conference in 1985, Peter Waite advocated Atlantic Canada rather than the Maritimes as the proper scope for studies that enlarge the investigation beyond a single province: “We are not to allow Newfoundland and Labrador to be de-confederated....We must not act like the *Historical Statistics of Canada* and assume that the history of Newfoundland begins only in 1949.....Let us take the big view, not the little one”.⁴

This modest groundswell of revisionism has not prevailed against tidal-wave thinking, emanating from an older orientation, that wants to submerge Newfoundland below consciousness whenever she falls politically out of step with the rest of the region. One had hoped that the 1990s would be the decade when the Atlantic Region — excluding nobody, promising new insights and observations — would supplant Maritime Provinces as the usual scale for studies east of Quebec. It is not happening. The publishers’ blurb for *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* claims this book is “destined to be the regional history of choice for Atlantic Canada”. One expects, and fears, this will indeed be the case. It has started already. In the last *Acadiensis* Ramsay Cook, while noting that Newfoundland was “unevenly integrated” throughout most of this book, was nevertheless sufficiently misled by appearances to think he was reviewing “The new history of Atlantic Canada”. Atlantic Region is a big idea, like the elephant, and also seems to need prolonged gestation. *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* certainly indicates it is an idea whose time has not yet come — not for this generation of historians, or for the next generation either perhaps, whose formation will be powerfully influenced by the narrower concept which shaped this important work.

MALCOLM MacLEOD

1 *Acadiensis*, VIII, 1 (Autumn 1978), pp. 47-76.

2 *Acadiensis*, XV, 1 (Autumn 1985), pp. 3-34.

3 (St. John’s, 1982).

4 Peter Waite, “Keeping Newfoundland and other Issues: Perspectives on Political History”, in P.A. Buckner, ed., *Teaching Maritime Studies* (Fredericton, 1986), pp. 24-5.