

Focusing on their Roots: University of New Brunswick Historians and Regional History

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Focusing on their Roots: University of New Brunswick Historians and Regional History

THERE ARE TWO MAJOR REASONS why the Department of History at the University of New Brunswick is well-known to those of us who have been dabbling in regional history over the past 30 years: one, *Acadiensis*, our regional history journal, which was conceived and produced there and has resided there since its first issue in 1971; and two, the biennial Atlantic Canada Studies Conference which was initiated by the History Department at the University of New Brunswick in 1974. These two contributions have had a seminal effect on the study of the region. The question this paper poses is, why was it the University of New Brunswick that provided the scholarly environment which fostered these important institutions of regional study? In addressing this question my focus is on the positive attributes of the University of New Brunswick History Department, not on the negative aspects of other regional departments. Among the positive attributes are the people. Most of the key members of the department were locally educated New Brunswickers committed to the welfare of the region; a few of them were refugees from other centres of learning whose ambition and determination acted as a valuable catalyst for the furtherance of a regionalist agenda.¹

To explore this subject, we have to go back in time to the mid-1930s, when a newly minted Ph.D. by the name of Alfred G. Bailey, or Alfie as his friends called him, found that his personal ambitions coincided with the grievances of provincial politicians against the federal government. From his position as a curator of the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John, he suggested to the Attorney General that the province's constitutional position on the compact theory of Confederation could be strengthened if a chair in history was created at the university to give support to the province's justification for its interpretation of federal-provincial relations.² For the first member of the University of New Brunswick History Department, established by the government, Bailey proposed himself, and the proposition was accepted. Hence, in 1938, Bailey returned to his roots in Fredericton, where his father had been born in the Old Arts Building; his paternal grandfather had been a chemistry professor; his great-grandfather Marshall d'Avray had founded the Teachers' College and served as professor of Modern Languages and Literature; and Bailey himself had graduated with a B.A. in 1927.

To the position as first official historian at the University of New Brunswick, but an historian who was also an anthropologist, philosopher and literary scholar, Bailey brought impeccable research skills. The New Brunswick Museum had recently published his University of Toronto doctoral dissertation on *The Conflict of European and Eastern Algonkian Cultures, 1504-1700: A Study in Canadian Civilization*.

1 This analysis has been informed by conversations with T.W. Acheson, Thomas J. Condon, E.R. Forbes, John Reid, Della Stanley and D.M. Young.

2 A.G. Bailey, "A New Brunswick View of Confederation", 12 January 1938 (courtesy of E.R. Forbes); E.R. Forbes, "In Search of a Post-Confederation Maritime Historiography, 1900-1967", *Acadiensis*, VIII, 1 (Autumn 1978), pp. 11-12.

According to Bruce Trigger, the book established Bailey as North America's pioneer ethnohistorian.³ Regrettably, the importance of his work was not known or recognized for another 30 years or perhaps we might have seen additional work in this field. Although Fredericton did not become a centre for research in native studies, it remained for the rest of his long life the centre, and New Brunswick the focus, of Bailey's world. Bailey was able to secure a prominent berth for history at the university and within history to promote, in particular, regional history. As he wrote in the 1940s, "Although all knowledge is the province of a university, it has been assumed that the Provincial University should include among its concerns a study of the forces that have shaped the life of the community of New Brunswick which it was so largely established to serve". Studies of New Brunswick history would help to "create an intellectual ferment without which there can be little hope of progress towards the realization of a better life for all".⁴

Bailey contributed to the prestigious position which history assumed in the curriculum of the university and the furtherance of regional history in a number of ways. First, his own historical interests resulted in the production, between the 1940s and 1960s, of a range of papers on the Confederation debate in New Brunswick, regional culture and the nature of Canadian nationalism. Collected together and published in 1972 under the title *Culture and Nationality*, they reveal Bailey's wide-ranging anthropological, historical and literary interests.⁵

Second, Bailey oversaw the expansion of history and the social sciences by assuming a leadership role within the university. He became honorary librarian in 1946 and for many years was in a position to encourage Lord Beaverbrook, the major supporter of the university, to build up the library resources under his guidance. Not only was he head of the department until 1970, but he also served as dean of arts between 1946 and 1965, and then academic vice president. In the 1950s and 1960s he became a principal advisor to Colin Mackay, a former student, who was president of the university for 15 years until brought down by the Strax affair in 1969.⁶ Mackay's feudal style appealed to Bailey who used his influence to further the interests of history and to memorialize his forebears through the naming of key new buildings.

Third, in the immediate post-war period Bailey also encouraged the development of graduate history studies with a regional focus and launched a university-sponsored historical studies series, admittedly short-lived, to promote research into the history of New Brunswick. At the time, he had a sympathetic president, Milton Gregg, who believed it was important for the University of New Brunswick "to develop a school of graduate research" through which "The standard of undergraduate study is raised and the whole intellectual life of the university quickened".⁷ Bailey himself had

3 Bruce G. Trigger, "Alfred G. Bailey — Ethnohistorian", *Acadiensis*, XVIII, 2 (Spring 1989), pp. 3-21.

4 A.G. Bailey, "Introduction" to Katherine F.C. MacNaughton, *The Development of the Theory and Practice of Education in New Brunswick, 1784-1900* (Fredericton, 1947).

5 Alfred Goldsworthy Bailey, *Culture and Nationality: Essays by A.G. Bailey* (Toronto, 1972).

6 The Strax Affair is considered one of the turning points in the modern history of the University of New Brunswick. See Peter Kent, "The Strax Affair at the University of New Brunswick: A Test of Academic Freedom", paper presented at the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, 5 May 2000.

7 Milton F. Gregg, "Foreword" to MacNaughton, *Education in New Brunswick*.

decided that what Canadian history then needed was a “series of provincial histories of beliefs, attitudes, and institutions, in such fields as education, religion, science, and literature”. He further believed that “While our primary interest may be in the solution of contemporary problems, it is assumed that these problems must necessarily be approached historically If we are to understand things as they are, and anticipate what they are likely to be, we must appreciate the causes that have made them so”.⁸ (I should add parenthetically that the three historians he drafted to write the proposed local studies were all women, a choice which may confirm Bailey’s “relative” lack of male chauvinism at a time when gender neutrality was rare in academic life).⁹

Fourth, Bailey’s ability to build a Department of History was aided by the pre-eminent position which history held for many years within the curriculum. Since history was a required first-year subject for students in engineering and forestry, the university’s major applied sciences, and was also required for the education degree, Bailey had ample justification for expanding the teaching capacity through hirings in the 1950s and 1960s. He had a penchant for making appointments of “boys” from the region whose historical interests always included home, whatever the actual subjects of their doctoral research or the nature of their teaching duties. This was no accident, for Bailey had decided that the history curriculum should establish Fredericton as the centre and the vantage point from which to appreciate and move on to understand province, region, country and world. This world contained a surfeit of British elements, including the American colonial, the medieval and the imperial. Into the largely Britannic mix he stirred a little Chinese in order to provide the cultural diversity one would expect from an ethnohistorian. Until the 1970s, the curriculum and personnel reflected his personal preferences. He continued to haunt the halls of the History Department, a kind and courtly mentor, until his death in 1997. The local men he appointed taught their various topics across time and space at the undergraduate level, but they supported Bailey’s emphasis on the culture of New Brunswick by supervising students at the M.A. level in topics far removed from their primary teaching and research areas.

Bailey’s first appointment after the war was that of William Stewart MacNutt, a Prince Edward Islander with Dalhousie and London degrees, whose colonial pedigree as a descendant of portraitist Robert Harris was almost as exalted as Bailey’s. MacNutt’s gregarious, plain-dealing, conservative approach complemented Bailey’s aristocratic, politically astute, innovative style. In 1965, MacNutt succeeded Bailey as dean but never as head or chair of the department. MacNutt’s influence, however, was specifically regional as far as his scholarly pursuits were concerned. Not only did he write the first modern history of New Brunswick, but he also had the unenviable task of contributing a volume on the history of the region to the McClelland and Stewart Centenary Series which assigned the Atlantic colonies the kind of minuscule weight which reflected the Central Canadian view that nothing ever happened down here.¹⁰

8 Bailey, “Introduction” to MacNaughton, *Education in New Brunswick*.

9 Donald Wright, “Gender and the Professionalization of History in English Canada before 1960”, *Canadian Historical Review*, 81, 1 (March 2000), pp. 47-8.

10 W.S. MacNutt, *New Brunswick, A History: 1784-1867* (Toronto, 1963) and *The Atlantic Provinces: The Emergence of Colonial Society, 1712-1857* (Toronto, 1965).

MacNutt taught the first regional history course, this at the graduate level, and he seized the opportunity presented by the new and flush Canada Council in the late 1960s to arrange for Canadian participation in a large-scale international research project on the Loyalists.¹¹

While Bailey and MacNutt were the only two regional specialists during the two decades following the war, most of the other faculty reinforced the local interest, which in my university would have been, and indeed was, dismissed as “navel-gazing”.¹² Two young New Brunswick war veterans, James K. Chapman and D. Murray Young, took University of New Brunswick degrees and eventually went off to London for doctoral work with the affable eccentric G.S. Graham. Archival repositories in London and the benign neglect of the Canadian incumbent of the Rhodes Chair of Imperial History at King’s College, University of London, enabled students to pursue Canadian domestic topics disguised as British imperial ones. And so Chapman wrote about Lieutenant Governor Arthur Hamilton Gordon, whose tour of duty happened to include New Brunswick, and Young built on his interest in an earlier New Brunswick lieutenant governor, Howard Douglas, which he had developed as an M.A. thesis at Toronto, to unravel the mysteries of the early 19th-century Colonial Office.¹³ Chapman returned in the mid-1950s to the University of New Brunswick where he taught British history and occasionally led MacNutt’s graduate seminar on topics relating to the St. John River area and modern provincial politics. Young’s return was delayed by an appointment at Memorial University, but in 1959, after a year immersed in African studies at Boston University, he moved back to Fredericton and became another of the department’s British specialists, focusing on the far-flung regions of the Empire. In the 1970s, after the retirement of the department’s pioneers, Young added a course in the history of New Brunswick to his teaching, initially with T.W. (Bill) Acheson. Young trained his students in the use of documents essential for an understanding of the constitutional and administrative development of the province. When he retired, the course was taken over by Gail Campbell, who added statistical evidence to the analysis. Of all the second-generation New Brunswick faculty, Young was the most attentive to the fostering of the study of the region.

The promising students of the Canadianists in the 1950s and 1960s included T.W. Acheson, Stephen Patterson, William (Bill) Spray, Peter Kent and Dominick (Toby) Graham — five men who later joined the department and that of St. Thomas University and either taught or, in the case of the non-Canadian specialists, supported the teaching of, regional history and encouraged graduate research in local topics. For example, Graham, who wrote an M.A. thesis in the early 1960s on a topic of regional relevance, became a specialist in military history, which emerged as the second major

11 For a list of MacNutt’s publications see “William Stewart MacNutt: A Bibliography, 1932-1983”, compiled by Gertrude E. Gunn, *Acadiensis*, XIV, 1 (Autumn 1984), pp. 146-54.

12 Phillip A. Buckner has some comments on the two pioneer members of the department in “‘Limited Identities’ and Canadian Historical Scholarship: An Atlantic Provinces Perspective”, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 23, 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 1988), pp. 177-98.

13 James Keith Chapman, *The Career of Arthur Hamilton Gordon (1829-1912)* (Toronto, 1964); Douglas MacMurray Young, *The Colonial Office in the Early Nineteenth Century* (London, 1961).

graduate field and occasionally encompassed regional topics. As E.R. Forbes was to discover, “the department gave the regional field pride of place”.¹⁴ For the interpretation of the history of the region, the most important appointment of the 1960s was that of T.W. Acheson. A Master’s student of Murray Young, under whose supervision he produced “Denominationalism in a Loyalist County: A Social History of Charlotte, 1783-1900”, Acheson started his career as a high school history teacher. (The tradition of school teaching was strong in the department, and included MacNutt, Young, Graham, Kent and Forbes). From his vantage point as head of the 17-person History Department at Fredericton High School, Acheson could afford to be somewhat skeptical when Bailey came courting him in 1964. Nonetheless, Acheson made the transition from the secondary to the post-secondary level and taught in the department for two years before embarking on the doctorate at the University of Toronto which he felt was an essential accoutrement of the modern academic.

While Acheson was one of the New Brunswick “boys”, I am sure he would be the first to agree that at the crucial juncture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a little cross-fertilization was needed. It came with a number of offshore appointments. In the interests of time, I am going to focus on two only — Thomas (Tom) J. Condon, an American colonial specialist, a U.S. citizen and Harvard man who first joined the department for four years in 1962 and returned in 1970, and Phillip (Phil) Buckner, a Torontonian with a G.S. Graham doctorate who joined the department in 1968. Both these men made infrastructure contributions which, when added to the intellectual leadership provided by Acheson and, by the mid-1970s, Forbes (who was New Brunswick-born but not UNB-bred), as well as the encouragement of their sympathetic colleagues, created an attractive centre for teaching, researching and studying regional history.

In the ferment and expansion of the 1960s, Condon injected a degree of new ambition into a department dominated by locals and saddled also with a number of endearing dilettantes. Sophisticated, smart and willing to take risks, Condon promoted the establishment of a Ph.D. programme, which faltered under its own weight initially but was revived, with his encouragement, when he returned as dean of arts after a stint in the late 1960s as an executive associate of the American Council of Learned Societies. While in New York, Condon had helped to launch the multi-institutional Loyalist Studies Programme so dear to MacNutt, but he may have seen more potential for putting the university on the map with a journal of regional history.

A journal was not a new idea. Several years earlier Condon had discouraged President Mackay from promoting a cross-border venture with the *New England Quarterly* because he felt that a totally Canadian initiative would be more appropriate. Acheson’s experience illustrated the need for a regional journal. In the late 1960s, he found that the *Canadian Historical Review* would not publish his paper on Charlotte County demography because it was of local interest, whereas that same journal was quite happy to publish his article on 1820s York (i.e. Toronto) commerce, presumably because that was of national interest.¹⁵ Condon supplied the resources for *Acadiensis*

14 Discussion with Ernie Forbes, 15 January 2000.

15 T.W. Acheson, “A Study in the Historical Demography of a Loyalist County”, *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 1 (April 1968), pp. 53-65, and “The Structure and Nature of York Commerce in the 1820s”, *Canadian Historical Review*, XLIX, 4 (December 1968), pp. 406-29.

— to him is owed the university space, secretarial support and release-time for the editor. His next job was to find an editor. Acheson claims to have identified the winner, though he admits he may not have been the only one to think that Phillip Buckner was the best candidate. Condon may have reached the same conclusion independently and, whatever the case, we are lucky he made the decision he did. Why Buckner took on the journal only he can tell, but he turned out to have the appropriate combination of drive, editorial skill, management ability and confidence not only to get the project off the ground but also to emerge as one of Canada's most successful history journal editors.

As for the doctoral programme, the members of the department narrowed their focus to include only a few good students while continuing to nurture their M.A. programme, which has been hugely productive for a small department. It is perhaps fitting that John G. Reid, the first Ph.D. student in history to graduate from the University of New Brunswick in 1976, was a student of Condon whose vision and support had been key to the development of the department as a whole and to the initiatives which would benefit regional history in particular. Reid set a standard which won over the departmental members who doubted the efficacy of a doctoral programme. Another early Ph.D. graduate, who like Reid now teaches in the region, was Della Stanley, who finished in 1978. The importance of one's place of residence to one's choice of historical subject, which was so central to the department Bailey designed, was both familiar and common-sensical to Stanley. Supervised for her M.A. by MacNutt and then transferred on his death to Murray Young for doctoral advice, Stanley worked on a modern Acadian political topic which the department considered to be on the fringes of their competency and indeed contemplated transferring to political science.

When E.R. Forbes arrived in 1974 to replace MacNutt (who had retired), he knew that he would be teaching regional history, not just at the graduate level but that now finally the History Department would be offering local history at the undergraduate level. The regionalist ethos ran deep in its undergraduate pedagogy. In the 1970s, for example, the doctoral candidates tutoring in the Canadian History survey often focused on Atlantic Canadian topics. Forbes taught the regional courses consistently during his time at the University of New Brunswick, and in the process he produced several generations of students who understood the regional dilemma of sharing a rich heritage with a marginalized present. Both he and Acheson have explored the intricacies of the impact of Confederation on the politics, industry, transportation and human resources of the region. Together they have greatly expanded our knowledge of such topics as the economic and social history of southern New Brunswick, 19th-century urbanization, the historiography of the region, the women's movement and regional stereotypes.¹⁶ In addition to their own publications, which I suppose could have been written anywhere in the country — Toronto, Kingston, Vancouver — they

16 Acheson's most influential works are "The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880-1910", *Acadiensis*, I, 2 (Spring 1972), pp. 3-28, and *Saint John: The Making of a Colonial Urban Community* (Toronto, 1985); Forbes's are *The Maritime Rights Movement 1919-1927: A Study in Canadian Regionalism* (Montreal and Kingston, 1979) and *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton, 1989).

have given students, particularly students of this region, many of whom could not have considered going to Toronto, Kingston or Vancouver, the opportunity to explore their roots through an amazing array of graduate thesis topics. The theses addressed economic crises, political careers, women's issues, community development, the status of ethnic groups and state and religious institutions and policies.

Most historians at the University of New Brunswick have functioned for half a century as either producers of regional history studies or facilitators for the study of the region. Or both. A more recent member of the department, David Frank, pointed out last year in a paper about *Acadiensis* that he had no connection with the university when he joined the department in 1980. Like Buckner before him, he was a B.A. graduate of the University of Toronto. Admittedly his interests in the region and arguably his dedication to the region had already been demonstrated in a doctoral dissertation on a regional topic, prepared in the region, not in Ontario or England like those of his predecessors. Unlike the earlier generations, he belongs "to a larger scholarly community that accepted regional history as a legitimate part of the research enterprise". As current editor of *Acadiensis*, he "assumed as a matter of course the premise that first-rate work of national significance could be completed within the scope of regional history and that, if published in a journal such as *Acadiensis*, it would be widely read".¹⁷ The study of regional history which is now so well-rooted in the region, and accepted with enthusiasm as a field of inquiry by historians elsewhere, is in no small degree owing to the dedication of the University of New Brunswick historians to the local scene. They sowed many of the seeds which produced the flowering of regional history.¹⁸

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17 David Frank, "Acadiensis, 1901 and 1999", Comments for a Panel on Canadian Historical Journals, Organization of American Historians Conference, Toronto, 23 April 1999.

18 We should note that University of New Brunswick historians were instrumental in the conception and production of the multi-authored volumes of regional history designed for undergraduate teaching: E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto and Fredericton, 1993) and Phillip A. Buckner and John G. Reid, eds., *The Atlantic Region to Confederation: A History* (Toronto and Fredericton, 1994). In the 1980s, Forbes also devoted considerable personal time and effort, on behalf of historians of the region, to an ultimately unsuccessful grant proposal for the creation of a "Centre of Excellence" in regional studies.