

# Dalhousie University and the Flowering of Atlantic Provinces Historiography, 1960-1980

E. R. Forbes

Volume 30, numéro 1, autumn 2000

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad30\\_1for07](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad30_1for07)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

## Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

## ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

## Citer ce document

Forbes, E. R. (2000). Dalhousie University and the Flowering of Atlantic Provinces Historiography, 1960-1980. *Acadiensis*, 30(1), 45–49.

Dalhousie University  
and the Flowering of Atlantic Provinces Historiography,  
1960-1980

RATHER THAN TALKING ABOUT OURSELVES, which was our original assignment, Judith Fingard and I thought it would be more interesting to look at our home departments' roles in the development of Atlantic Provinces historiography. To give the appearance of objectivity — if only the objectivity of initial ignorance — she agreed to treat the University of New Brunswick while I looked at Dalhousie University. Obviously our goals are not departmental histories, but rather the exploration of a few creative contributions by each department to the field.<sup>1</sup>

The growth of the field itself has been impressive. Two decades ago some of us complained of neglect and stereotyping in the region's history and of a dearth of books on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Last year Brian McKillop challenged J.L. Granatstein's portrayal of the "death" of Canadian history, in part, by citing the 21 books which had appeared on the history of the Maritimes alone in 1997 and noting that the historians of the Maritimes and Prairies together had produced in that year more than "the entire output of university-based historians [in Canada] in 1963".<sup>3</sup> Nor were the region's authors lagging in quality or innovation as several "honourable mentions" for the John A. Macdonald Prize attest.<sup>4</sup>

As the focus in Canadian history shifted in the early 1960s from "national" to more limited perspectives, Dalhousie University, serving the largest metropolis in the largest province in the region, was in a strong position to play a pioneering role.<sup>5</sup> Not only did it have the Public Archives of Nova Scotia on campus, but the provincial archivist, D.C. Harvey, had traditionally offered a graduate seminar on "Canada with special reference to Nova Scotia".<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, old attitudes died hard. Even Harvey writing in the 1930s had been careful to concede the inferiority of local and regional history. Their "chief function", he suggested, was their contribution to larger perspectives such as world history.<sup>7</sup>

- 1 This paper is based in large part on conversations with the following: J. Murray Beck, Gordon Brown, Michael Cross, Judith Fingard, David Frank, Greg Kealey, Tony MacKenzie, Del Muise, Shirley Tillotson and Peter B. Waite. The responsibility for errors, of course, is mine alone.
- 2 E.R. Forbes, "In Search of a Post-Confederation Maritime Historiography, 1900-1967", *Acadiensis*, VIII, 1, (Autumn 1978), pp. 3-21; P.A. Buckner, "'Limited Identities' and Canadian Historical Scholarship: An Atlantic Provinces Perspective", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 23, 1-2 (Spring/Summer, 1988), pp. 177-98.
- 3 A.B. McKillop, "Who Killed Canadian History? A View from the Trenches", *Canadian Historical Review*, 80, 2 (June 1999), p. 290.
- 4 Examples of authors whose work received honourable mention for the Macdonald Prize include T.W. Acheson, Ian McKay, Colin Howell and Margaret Conrad.
- 5 For the university context, see P.B. Waite, *The Lives of Dalhousie University, Volume Two, 1925-1980: The Old College Transformed* (Montreal and Kingston, 1998).
- 6 See *Dalhousie University Calendars*, *passim*.
- 7 D.C. Harvey, "The Importance of Local History in the Writing of Canadian History", *Canadian Historical Review*, XIII, 3 (September 1932), p. 245. I am indebted to Jenny Clayton for bringing this article to my attention.

E.R. Forbes, "Dalhousie University and the Flowering of Atlantic Provinces Historiography, 1960-1980", *Acadiensis*, XXX, 1 (Autumn 2000), pp. 45-49.

Warnings of the dangers of too narrow a perspective seemed to intensify at Dalhousie following the 1957 transition in archivists from Harvey to C.B. Fergusson. An Oxford graduate, Fergusson was an outsider to the University of Toronto alumni who dominated the Canadian field. Shy, defensive and sometimes pedestrian in writing style, he gave particular offence by keeping the papers of W.S. Fielding, whose biography he seemed to inherit along with the position of archivist, closed to other researchers. Attacks on regional history were seldom direct. Usually they were couched as warnings against “antiquarianism” or as that beautifully question-begging accusation of “navel-gazing”. In fact, Judith Fingard recalls a proposal for a centre of regional studies at Dalhousie some years later being dismissed with the comment that “navel-gazing is the last thing this university needs to encourage”.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, Dalhousie did play a pioneering role in the development of a local and regional historiography. The key was provided by J. Murray Beck, a young political scientist who had worked under R. MacGregor Dawson at the University of Toronto. His analysis of the government of Nova Scotia, in a book by that name, was solidly grounded in historical perspective. At a time when political and constitutional history still dominated the national scene, Beck’s study opened the provincial field to the growing number of graduate students who were looking for thesis topics which might be undertaken from a local base. For these, Beck’s volume was a veritable gold mine. It gave the historical background of political institutions, sketched in 200 years of governors and their administrations, a century of premiers, their cabinets, party formation and election data. There were even chapters on municipal governments and the province’s role within the Canadian federation.<sup>9</sup> Suddenly it was possible for students and their supervisors to give the illusion of knowledgeable ability in proposing theses on local administrations, election studies or biographies of federal cabinet ministers. In the Department of History Peter Waite endorsed Beck’s work to his students without qualification. The late George Rawlyk, an ambitious young specialist in Canadian-American relations, was a particular admirer of Beck and had several political theses underway before leaving Dalhousie for Queen’s University in 1966. Other students, including myself, though officially working under Fergusson’s supervision, also looked to Beck for advice and criticism.

In the fall of 1963, Beck left his position at Canada’s Royal Military College — a position which he had held for 11 years — to accept appointment as full professor in the Department of Political Science at Dalhousie. The man was soon as highly regarded as his scholarship. With patience and enthusiasm he responded to the queries of the more than a dozen graduate history students writing on political history topics at Dalhousie. In 1966 the Department of History gave formal recognition to Beck’s assistance by having him teach a seminar on the history of Nova Scotia politics. Del Muise, a Killam Fellow at Dalhousie that year, was invited to help. It was a formidable class which included the likes of Allan Dunlop, David Flemming, Colin Howell, Ron Macdonald, Tony MacKenzie, Neil McLean, Peter McCreath, David Sutherland and Hugh Tuck. Some of these scholars shared a sense of mission as they

8 Conversation with Judith Fingard, 1999.

9 J. Murray Beck, *The Government of Nova Scotia* (Toronto, 1957).

sought to fill in the neglected regional chapter in the national historiography. Their pioneering theses would later provide the access points for an emerging generation of social historians.

It was in the encouragement of a more sophisticated social history of the Atlantic Provinces that the Dalhousie department made probably its greatest contribution. As is usual in such “creative moments”, there seemed to be a conjunction of individuals and ideas. In 1967, Judith Fingard, a Dartmouth native, joined the department, first as a “sessional” and later as a regular appointee. Judith had been a legend even as an undergraduate. I was taking a preliminary year to the master’s programme at Dalhousie in 1964 when I recall complaining to a fellow graduate student, Gordon Brown, that “all I get on essays is 78s. Hasn’t this department ever heard of 80s?” “Oh yes”, said Gordon. “They let a little girl into our seminars last year — an honours student — and she always got 90s! She married Professor Burroughs and went off to the University of London”.<sup>10</sup> Now, in the late 1960s, Judith was back, finishing up a fairly orthodox Ph.D. thesis in colonial administrative history, but signalling a new interest with a course entitled, “A Social History of the Atlantic Provinces, 1749-1851”.<sup>11</sup> In 1974 her now much-reprinted article, “The Winter’s Tale”, explained the seasonal nature of poverty in British North American cities.<sup>12</sup> She later recorded an interview with a CBC reporter in which she identified herself as a social historian whose particular interest was society’s bottom third.

In 1972 Judith was joined in the regional field by David Sutherland, a Dalhousie graduate, who had studied urban history with J.M.S. Careless at the University of Toronto. While finishing up a thesis on the merchants of Halifax in the early 19th century, David cooperated with Judith in offering courses on the social history of the region, province and city.

Meanwhile some exceptional students added new ingredients to the mix. In 1972, David Frank arrived on the scene from the University of Toronto. David had been interested in journalism and had taken a year off to edit the student newspaper, *The Varsity*, which appeared three times a week. When an apprenticeship in journalism did not immediately work out, David came to Halifax on a travelling fellowship in history. Introduced to regional history in Sutherland’s Nova Scotia seminar, he gradually defined a thesis on the coal miners of Nova Scotia. The thesis emphasized the need for “an adequate foundation in theory” and interacted with the work of Karl Marx, E.P. Thompson, E.J. Hobsbawm, Herbert Gutman and Antonio Gramsci.<sup>13</sup> Several years later, David published in *Acadiensis* a classic account of the miners’ struggle with the British Empire Steel Corporation. He oriented this in terms of the neo-Marxian underdevelopment paradigm which André Gunder Frank had applied to Latin America and which Bruce Archibald, a young sociology student, had addressed

10 Conversation with Gordon Brown, 1999.

11 *Dalhousie University Calendar, 1968-69*, p. 250. See also Eric Crouse, “People from the Periphery: Judith Fingard Contributing to the Liberation of Atlantic Canadian Historiography”, unpublished paper, University of New Brunswick, 1998.

12 Judith Fingard, “The Winter’s Tale: The Seasonal Contours of Pre-industrial Poverty in British North America, 1815-1860”, *Communications historiques/Historical Papers* (1974), pp. 65-94.

13 David Frank, “Coal Masters and Coal Miners: The 1922 Strike and the Roots of Class Conflict in the Cape Breton Coal Industry”, M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1974, p. 3.

in general terms to Nova Scotia.<sup>14</sup> In 1974 David entered Dalhousie's new Ph.D. programme in history — a programme which the previous year had seen its first graduate in the person of James Walker, who wrote on the Black Loyalists of Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone. David was joined in the pursuit of a Ph.D. by Nolan Reilly, who became interested in industrial development in Cumberland County. David also recalls giving a guest presentation in Judith's course where he encountered penetrating questions from a young undergraduate by the name of Ian McKay.

In 1974 the Department added to its staff Greg Kealey, who was finishing a Ph.D. thesis on the working class of Toronto at Rochester University, whose History Department featured the pioneering work of social historians such as Herbert Gutman and Christopher Lasch. A "human dynamo", as one colleague called him,<sup>15</sup> Greg not only offered classes in the field of working-class history, supervised the theses of Ph.D. students such as Craig Heron and John Manley, whom his presence had helped to attract, but in 1976 was the founding editor of a new journal, *Labour/Le Travailleur* (later *Labour/Le Travail*), which the Labour History Committee of the Canadian Historical Association had previously endorsed. Building strength on strength, in 1975 the department hired Michael Cross to add seniority to a young Canadian section. The editor of the *Canadian Historical Review* and a former editor of *Canadian Forum*, Cross joined Kealey — whom he had previously taught at the University of Toronto — in courses in social history and in thesis supervision.

Those who were at Dalhousie in the next few years tend to look back on this period as one of the most exciting for them intellectually. They recall the lively debates in departmental seminars, a revolving door of visiting speakers, the enthusiasm with which faculty and graduate students supported the journal *Labour/Le Travailleur* and later the zeal with which an interdisciplinary activist group, led by Ian McKay among others, sought to offer a socialist alternative to the people of the Maritimes through a popular magazine, *New Maritimes*, which first appeared in 1982.

For those of us teaching regional history outside of Halifax in the late 1970s, this period was memorable as well. Suddenly we found our teaching fields enriched and made more interesting by new theories on the problems of the region, a new illumination of the role of ordinary working people in the region be they miners, sailors, steelworkers, longshoremen, prostitutes or the urban poor; and as a research field, we found that the activity of the "Dalhousie School" had helped to make the study of Atlantic regional history much harder to ignore at the national level.

As Marxists, either explicit or implicit, the young Dalhousie scholars tended to emphasize class over region. When Greg Kealey first arrived in the Maritimes in the spring of 1974, his colleagues hustled him off to a conference at the University of New Brunswick so that he could meet the larger historical community. The first person he met was Tony MacKenzie. The second was Ernie Forbes.<sup>16</sup> I think for a

14 David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation", *Acadiensis*, VII, 1 (Autumn 1977), pp. 3-34; André Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil* (New York, 1967); Bruce Archibald, "The Development of Underdevelopment in the Atlantic Provinces", M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1971.

15 Conversation with Michael Cross, 1999.

16 Conversation with Greg Kealey, 1999.

brief period Greg might have conceded the pre-eminence of regional influences, if only in the determination of male hair styles.

In preparing this paper based on interviews, it would have been easy to fall into the nostalgic trap which awaits the unwary oral historian. In interviewing people of my own vintage who had been at Dalhousie in the 1970s and 1980s, I was presented with the classic “golden age” scenario. Those were the “good old days” — the days of youthful enthusiasm, of a sense of mission, of a feeling of teamwork within the department and of cooperative action with like-minded scholars within the city and region. But the intensity of enthusiasm receded with the years and people left. Judith still blames herself for not doing more to keep Greg and Linda Kealey at Dalhousie *where they belonged!* And the exceptional students went off to become exceptional historians elsewhere.

I might have “bought” this picture of decline at Dalhousie but for two factors. First of all, in making my rounds of the department, I ran into Shirley Tillotson. And Shirley was bubbling as Shirley does. Dalhousie was a wonderful place to work! One had the cooperative support of colleagues in the department, and wonderful scholars in neighbouring universities and then there was that very positive community of regional historians . . . .<sup>17</sup> It became very clear that for the youthful, the enthusiasm, sense of mission and sheer excitement of teaching and research at Dalhousie, were as great as they had ever been. This was confirmed in more objective fashion as a rough count of history theses at Dalhousie showed more M.A. theses in Canadian history (21) had been completed in the decade of the 1990s than in any previous decade, and more Canadian doctoral theses had been turned out in the 1990s (11) than in the two previous decades combined (9). Obviously, there were still exceptional students at Dalhousie, and someone was minding the store there and doing it rather well.

E.R. FORBES

17 Conversation with Shirley Tillotson, 1999.