

Atlantic Canada: A Region in the Making, a volume in The Illustrated History of Canada. Margaret R. Conrad and James K. Hiller.

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Margaret R. Conrad and James K. Hiller, *Atlantic Canada: A Region in the Making*, a volume in *The Illustrated History of Canada*, Don Mills, ON, Oxford University Press, 236 pp., ill., maps, notes, bib. refs., index, softcover, \$34.95, 2001. ISBN 0-19-541044-0.

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WRITING A HISTORY of Atlantic Canada is a notoriously difficult task. The first question that arises is whether Atlantic Canada has ever existed, at least outside of the fertile imaginations of Ottawa bureaucrats since 1949 or university course outlines since the 1970s. Strong arguments can be made for longstanding regional linkages, based on such evidence as the inter-relationships of eastern Algonkian societies, the pre-eminence of fisheries in early imperial ventures, the strategic significance of the entry to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the difficulties of nineteenth-century economic development, and the political coordination that marked the "Atlantic Revolution" of the 1950s. Nevertheless, the question remains a good one. Even if it is answered affirmatively, as it was for example by the late David Alexander in his classic treatment of "Economic Growth in the Atlantic Region, 1880 to 1940, a further question remains."¹ The specific patterns and rhythms of historical evolution are clearly different between Newfoundland and the area now covered by the Maritime provinces. The complexity increases when Labrador is considered, and also through the existence of varied historical experiences in sub-regions of the Maritimes. What kind of historical approach can bring out the affinities without straining the evidence? A simple chronological narrative is unlikely to do so. A purely thematic analysis risks losing coherence. Aspiring

historians of Atlantic Canada have to operate within the limits of whatever intellectual terrain may remain and be tenable.

Margaret R. Conrad and James K. Hiller are prudent enough to address these questions at the outset. However, the virtues of their book go far beyond mere prudence. They deliver the most convincingly integrated history of the Atlantic region that has been written to date. That they do so in brisk though graceful prose, accompanied by illustrations that do much more than adorn the text, is a tribute not only to their authorship but also to the *Oxford Illustrated History of Canada* of which theirs is one of six projected volumes.

“Despite its common usage”, Conrad and Hiller admit, “the phrase ‘Atlantic Canada’ still sits awkwardly with many scholars” (1). While the scope of the book is predicated on the existence of “the current political definition of Atlantic Canada — the sometimes controversial, often artificial boundaries marked on a map” (2), the authors work in reality with subtler definitions of identity. They delineate functional as well as formal linkages, and pay especial attention to “regions of the mind” that have cultural and environmental roots. “Mi’kma’ki, Acadia, Africadia, Atlantica, Cape Breton, and Labrador”, they comment, “are only the most obvious examples of the regions that exist within, across, and beyond provincial boundaries” (2). Not surprisingly for a book in which the majority of the works cited in the bibliography were published in 1989 or after, the issues explored are informed by recent scholarship. The environmental costs of the pursuit of industrial development find a place here alongside the cultural costs of anti-modernist stereotyping of quaint but feckless Maritimers and Newfoundlanders. At the same time, Conrad and Hiller steer well clear of the trap of making their book a pastiche of current preoccupations. “Atlantic Canada”, they judge, “is a complex region with a history long and deep enough to accommodate most academic prejudices” (11). Acknowledgment of complexity is integral to their work, and where advocacy emerges — and it does, especially in the final chapter — it is not of the academic variety but rather it laments the eclipse in the late twentieth century of “the noble dream that made human welfare rather than corporate profits the measure of a civil society” (212).

In part, *Atlantic Canada: A Region in the Making* is a synthesis. As such, each of its chapters captures a remarkable range of issues. The balancing of aboriginal with biblical and scientific creation stories is followed through with a continuing respect for aboriginal forms of record-keeping and world views. Imperial and colonial initiatives are treated in environmental context. As more populous societies developed over time, so the chapters define the influences of ethnicity, gender and social class in “a mature and relatively stable pre-industrial society” (111), in adjustments to “the decline or realignment of older industries and the aggressive pursuit of new ones” (135), and ultimately amongst the tumultuous succession of twentieth-century mutations. Yet synthesis is only part of the story. Integration at a deeper level comes from the combination of chronologically-organized chapters

with thematic fibres that are woven throughout. It is these threads of argument that link the Maritimes and Newfoundland: the role of seasonality in resource-harvesting pursuits, the existence of separate but parallel routes from pre-industrial to post-industrial societies, the evolution of political cultures capable of challenging the Canadian status quo in the “Atlantic Revolution” of the late 1950s.

Meanwhile, the illustrations are powerful both in their own right and in combination with the text. Some have been seen frequently — the small Labrador boy looking even smaller beside two prize codfish (139), the women hurrying from Africville to downtown Halifax through the devastation of the Halifax Explosion (166) — but are as evocative here as ever. Others are striking in their unfamiliarity. As well as photographic images and editorial cartoons, paintings are reproduced to good effect. Rather than showing the more conventional photographs of banks of cages, for example, the Prince Edward Island fox-farming industry is represented by John Gothard Baker’s 1934 oil painting in which the foxes themselves look the reader in the eye from their captivity. Both in black-and-white and in colour plates, artists from the anonymous Innu creator of a painted caribou-skin coat to well-known contemporaries such as David Blackwood, Thaddeus Holownia, and Mary Pratt chart their own cultural paths.

The most tentative passages in the volume come towards its end. There is no concluding chapter, but instead an extended treatment of the 1949-1989 period as “The Real Golden Age?” Conrad and Hiller, like most recent authors, have little truck with the notion of a mid-nineteenth-century “Golden Age of the Maritimes”. They see the post-Second World War era, with the emergence of “a comfortable, if unequal, relationship with the rest of Canada” (212), as having some claim on this epithet — but the question mark remains. Regional development policies were successfully advocated by the politicians of the era of the “Atlantic Revolution”, while social barriers based on both gender and ethnicity came under attack. However, these were also the years of environmental setbacks ranging from oil spills to over-fishing, and of resettlement programs that sacrificed the homes of African-Nova Scotians and outport Newfoundlanders on the altar of an ill-defined ideology of modernization. These were the years when regional development programs were sidetracked into critically flawed mega-projects, and when any semblance of Atlantic ownership of these programs was relinquished. Conrad and Hiller end by documenting the late twentieth-century turn to retrenchment and restructuring at the expense of “the dismantling of the interventionist state”, and arguing that in the present turn-of-the-century era “the region is undeniably at another turning point in its long history” (212). A.J.P. Taylor once famously wrote of the Revolution of 1848 in Germany that “German history reached its turning-point and failed to turn. This was the fateful essence of 1848”.² Future historians may or may not offer a similar judgment on Atlantic Canada in the early twenty-first century. But for a vivid and convincing historical perspective from the viewpoint of 2001, they will

be able to do no better than turn to the first-rate book that Conrad and Hiller have crafted.

Notes

¹*Acadiensis* 8(1) (1978), 47-76.

²A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of Germany Since 1815* (1946, rep. New York, 1962), 68.