

The Burden of Regionalism

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Reviews/Revue

The Burden of Regionalism

“Regionalism” is perhaps the predominant characteristic of Canadian life today, and it has made a major impact on the writing of Canadian history in recent years. This is not to suggest that “regionalism” is something new in Canada, or that the regions have been ignored in past historical writing. The phenomenon, itself, has always been with us; it is reflected in our constitution, our federal cabinets and virtually every “national” voluntary organization. That it is not so obvious in the way that our economy and communications systems are organized is one of the country’s major unsolved problems. Regionalism is also a dominant theme in Canadian fiction: no one could mistake the origins of Ernest Buckler, Peggy Attwood, Roch Carrier or W. O. Mitchell. As for schools of painting one need only mention the Group of Seven to realize that the Canadian imagination, and consequently cultural identity, can only be understood in Northrop Fry’s terms: identity is regional and cultural in origin while unity is national and political.

Historical writing has also been regional in its content, though perhaps not in its approach. The so-called national schools have, in reality, had a rather obviously regional focus. Those who live in the Valley of the Fraser, the Red or the Restigouche can hardly accept the Laurentian view of Canadian history as “national”, unless, of course, they are content to be considered as “colonials” — a point made long ago by W. L. Morton. And the other nationalist themes fare little better. But there is something new about regional historical scholarship these days, and that is the tendency to see regionalism as a virtue of Canadian life rather than an obstacle to Canadian unity. The latter view was at least a strong undercurrent in such regional studies as the Social Credit in Alberta Series, while today regionalism whether in the form of Quebec nationalism, the Westerner’s insistence on the distinctiveness of his way of life, or the Newfoundlander’s questioning of “modernization”, is viewed as a virtue. This sentiment finds its counterpart throughout the developed world — in Scotland and Wales, among Bretons and Provençals. It is related to the feelings that many Canadians have about the United States, only that is called nationalism because it comes from Ontario.

Yet, despite the persistence of regional themes and mentalities in our life, we do not really know all that much about the phenomenon. Can it be defined or described in any satisfactory manner? In her study, *Politics and Territory: The Sociology of Regional Persistence in Canada* (Montreal and London, McGill-Queens University Press, 1974), Professor Mildred Schwartz argues from a wealth of survey data that regionalism in Canada is “structural”, i.e. rooted in economic, geographical and political conditions. These structural differences produce regional “states of mind”, regional “life styles”, and regional “behaviour”. In her judgement political structures are

at the heart of regional definition. In one of her clearer sentences she writes that "For the most part, regions are political units, and where they are not, they are combinations of such units, with some independence as political actors" (p. 310). By this definition "the west", especially "the prairies", is a region, though one might argue that the power of Alberta gives it a regional identity and interest of its own. Again, "the Atlantic" provinces form a region, though the differences among the four provinces sometime appear to over-ride similarities.

Professor Schwartz' book is a useful one for historians and other social scientists since it makes a serious effort to give the term "region" both definition and content. It is unfortunate that its opaque and jargon-ridden prose, which sometimes merely disguises crashing statements of the obvious; frequently makes the book nearly impenetrable. It has other weaknesses. Despite the remark that regionalism is a "state of mind", not very much is done to demonstrate the contention. Moreover, the book is seriously weakened by its lack of historical perspective. Survey research can provide evidence about a contemporary phenomenon; only an historical dimension can make those attitudes understandable, i.e. explain the emergence of a "state of mind". Nor does *Politics and Territory* offer much insight into the transition from "region" to "nation" which, once again, is a question of the "state of mind".

Is Quebec a "province", a "region" or a "nation"? Or can it be all three? In his elegantly argued essay, *Nationalism, Self-Determination and the Quebec Question* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1974), David Cameron sets out a number of useful intellectual guides to an understanding of these issues. Because of his considerable knowledge of European history and particularly of political ideas, Cameron is especially good at setting out the various concepts of nation. On the one hand, there is the Germanic idea, formulated by Herder, which defined nation as a culturally uniform community deriving from *volk* origins. On the other hand, there is the French concept, explained best by Renan, in which nation is a matter of self-determination by people who may well have very different cultural backgrounds but who want to "do great things together". The English, as usual, had no clear idea of nation: J. S. Mill seemingly agreed with Herder, while Acton developed the idea of "nationality" along lines somewhat similar to Renan. Applying these ideas to Canada abstractly produces little but confusion. In Herder's terms, Francophone Quebec could qualify as a "nation", but the problem is that nearly twenty percent of Quebec is not Francophone. Alternatively, Quebec might be viewed as a nation in Renan's terms, but these are terms which equally well apply to Canada as a whole, or to any other of its "regions".

Given the state of Canada today, these are more than mere academic distinctions. Many Quebeckers write as though "cultural" and "political"

nations coincided in Quebec, and therefore the right of self-determination is self-evident. The present Quebec government frequently acts on that assumption. Professor Cameron's book is a timely and sophisticated dismissal of such "self-evident" truths. Though he views nationalism as a rather more benign ideology than some other readings of modern history, including Canadian, might suggest, his Burkean warnings about the danger of political claims based on theories of absolute right are eminently sensible and completely convincing. Unfortunately — to mutilate Burke — philosophers are not kings.

Since the "Quebec question" is his central focus, Cameron has not much to say about the idea of nation and nationalism in English Canada, apart from brief discussions of such recent writers as George Grant and Northrop Fry. Recently there has been much rhetoric about "English Canada" and even "English Canadian nationalism". (Ironically this nationalist idea derives much of its strength from the once fashionable writings of Louis Hartz.) But keeping Cameron's distinctions in mind, what is "English Canada"? If cultural homogeneity is the criterion, then English Canada is partly in Quebec. If it is Renan's concept of the perpetual plebiscite why is it dubbed "English" Canada? Forgetting about Quebec what validity, what moral authority, does the concept of "English Canada" have outside Ontario? The answer is by no means obvious. Would the idea of "English Canada" take precedence over "regional identities", if the federation were severed by Quebec's secession? A well-known Newfoundland historian recently responded to a proposal for constitutional change which advocated negotiations between "English Canada" and "Quebec" as "a Toronto Puff". If Quebec rejects the present arrangement, Professor David Alexander insisted quite logically, we should go back to 1865 and the principle of one bloody colony, one bloody vote.¹ A puff deflated!

This continued segmentation of "English Canada" is described and explained in *Canada and the Burden of Unity* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1977), an excellent collection of historical-cum-polemical essays edited by David Bercuson. The contributors to the book share two assumptions. The first is that Canadian history is best understood from a regional perspective. Secondly, they believe that the regional approach reveals that the regions, here understood as the prairies and the Atlantic provinces, bear the burden of unity, and some other region reaps its rewards. Indeed, the two assumptions may not be distinct at all. There are problems with the theory and with its application, but the book's strengths greatly outweigh its shortcomings.

Since the history of the Atlantic provinces is less well served by secondary works than that of the prairies, the essays on the former region are fresher

1 David Alexander to *The Canadian Forum* (September, 1977), p. 34.

than those on the west. This is especially true of the first class contributions of Ernest Forbes and William Acheson. Basing his argument on the solid research he has done on the “maritime rights” movement, Forbes documents clearly the manner in which the nationalization of the railways at the end of the Great War, and the application of uniform “national” rates, contributed to the decline of maritime industry. That the process began under the regime of Nova Scotia born Prime Minister Borden is not without its irony. Acheson’s more general survey of the economic development of the maritimes within the framework of “empire” Canada further underlines the argument of his colleague. Acheson’s story is one of an increasingly centralized economy — centralized in Toronto and Montreal — gradually but relentlessly asserting control over the economic institutions of the maritimes. This was not the survival of the fittest, but rather of the politically powerful. Forbes and Acheson are gentle protesters (perhaps because both have supped at the Imperial educational table), and urge only that Canada, in Acheson’s words, “accept moral and social” responsibility to “provide the support and protection upon which a stable, broad industrial structure can re-emerge in the Maritime region” (p. 109). Colin Howell’s essay on Nova Scotia’s intermittent quasi-secessionist tradition reveals a similarly gentle protest tradition. Though he condemns the inequities of the federal system, his chief proposal for change is Senate reform. It has always seemed to me that the one convincing argument for abolishing the Senate was that its demise would prevent any further time wasting speculation about methods of reform.

David Smith, whose essay on western regional politics is perhaps the best single contribution to the book, rejects Senate reform on the grounds that neither federal nor provincial politicians really want to establish rivals. Instead, after a lucid survey of Western protest, he urges a combination of decentralization of administration and a devolution of power. He feels that the third option of strengthening western representation in the federal cabinet is hopeless. (The essay was written before Jack Horner left the Conservative corner.) The ideas, which are given further support by Ted Regehr’s careful account of federal transportation policy and western needs, are well stated though they take little account of the needs of the rest of the country.

Here then is the paradox of regionalism in Canada: since its causes are different, its demands may be conflicting. As David Smith points out, western discontents arise not from economic deprivation but from economic strength. That is why the western provinces want political power transferred from the centre. The Atlantic provinces, on the other hand, are discontented for the opposite reason. The mere transfer of political power eastward would be an empty gesture unless oil and potash went with it. Consequently the maritime contributors to this volume remain centralists, in contrast to their western colleagues. What the maritime contributors do not reveal is why their region

does not feel the same political impotence as the west. The answer is that in matters of regional economic development the real clout at Ottawa comes from Quebec, and the maritimes benefit from that clout. Paul Phillips, a Manitoba contributor, summarizes the Canadian dilemma when he writes that what we need is “the re-establishment of a national authority as the agency of economic control and its commitment to the goal of equitable regional development” (p. 37). Indeed — but how? The author of the workable answer gets the Deputy Ministership in Finance.

Phillips is alone among the contributors in discussing the part played by American investment in Canada’s unequal economic growth and the emergence of regionalism. He is, perhaps, the one nationalist in the volume and it is his contention that “continentalism” must be reversed and new national policies devised. But what would be the outlines of those policies given the distribution of political power in Canada? After all it is “national policies” which the other essayists identify as the current causes of regionalism.

The individual essays in *Canada and the Burden of Unity* are well argued, well documented, and provocative. Yet, as a whole, the book has some problems. David Bercuson begins his sprightly introduction by saying that “Canada is a country of regions”. But neither he nor anyone else in the book attempts to define the term. A casual reader might be forgiven for assuming that the maritime provinces are homogeneous or even, perhaps, that Nova Scotia is the maritimes. The essays might have said something about the maritimes’ own regionalism. And the same may be said of the western essays. Manitoba receives short shrift in the western discussions, and one is left wondering if it is really part of the western region, or is it still W. L. Morton’s extension of Grit Ontario? Or is it one of the maritime provinces? Whatever Premier Schreyer and Premier Blakeney have in common ideologically often seems less important than what Premier Blakeney and Premier Lougheed have in common materially. And is it pure fantasy to think that Premier Hatfield would be more at home at a Manitoba NDP Convention than at an Alberta Conservative meeting? Despite David Smith’s insistence that regionalism is more than just economics, the essays never go much beyond that — they never touch seriously on Professor Schwartz’ “states of mind”. Yet no one can read an anthology of writings like those contained in *By Great Waters* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1974), edited by Peter Neary and Patrick O’Flaherty, without getting a strong sense of local identity. In a different fashion, *Beyond the Atlantic Roar* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1974), by D. Campbell and R. A. MacLean, reveals clearly a regional “lifestyle” and “state of mind”. The Nova Scotia Scots, they write, “consider themselves Canadians without having undergone the experience of being ‘canadianized’” (p. 256). That is an hypothesis which needs exploration in all the regions of Canada.

Finally, a question about the main assumption underlying *Canada and the Burden of Unity*. In so effectively underlining the problems that the prairie and maritime regions have experienced the essayists have somewhat stacked the cards. The book says nothing about either the benefits which these regions gained from membership in the Canadian federation; nor do they hint that others may also carry part of the burden. While no one would take literally Mitch Hepburn's petulant complaint that Ontario was the "milch cow of Confederation", it would be equally misleading to picture it as a bloated parasite. In fact, one of the signs of Ontario's own growing "regionalism" is a paper, attached to the Province's 1977 Budget Statement, entitled "Federal Fiscal Redistribution within Canada".² It effectively establishes the case that Ontario pays for a considerable share of the burden of unity, too.

My point is that the "regional" approach to Canadian history, and to its discontents, has both strengths and weaknesses. The whole may not be greater than the parts, but it is at least the sum of them. This stimulating book of essays could not be expected to deal with the entire question, though it is perhaps a bit overly emphatic about the red side of the ledger. Any final assessment of the relative gains and losses experienced by the various regions within our federal system must include, among many other things, a calculation of the impact of inter-regional transfers. But how can you measure the significance of the transfer of a central Canadian like David Bercuson to Calgary?

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- 2 Ministry of Treasury, Economics and Intergovernmental Affairs, *Ontario Budget 1977* (Toronto, Government of Ontario, 1977), Budget Paper "E". See also *Interprovincial Trade Flows, Employment and the Tariff in Canada: Supplementary Material to the 1977 Ontario Budget* (Toronto, Government of Ontario, 1977).

Canadian Intellectual History and the "Buzzing Factuality"

The traditional notion of the history of ideas, as represented by a book such as A. O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being*, was to trace the development and permutations of great concepts over time, focussing on the major philosophers. The thoughts were usually studied quite independently of the thinkers, and typically in splendid isolation from the real world of society and action. In the past several decades, however, the history of ideas has been radically transformed, first into intellectual history by the Americans and then into *histoire des mentalités* by the French. The new approaches have insisted that great and original ideational formulations are historically less important than the constellations of unsystematic mental equipment (*l'outillage mental*) upon which most action is based, and that ideas must be seen