

Marking the Tides of Nova Scotia's Elastic History

Margaret Conrad's At the Ocean's Edge

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Marking the Tides of Nova Scotia's Elastic History: Margaret Conrad's *At the Ocean's Edge*

MARGARET CONRAD IS THE BEST PROFESSOR I NEVER HAD. Teaching at Acadia during the first few years of my undergraduate career, she had a reputation as an engaged scholar who expected her students not just to know the details about their chosen area of study but also the context in which it was situated. Though I never took a course with her, at that time her influence on me was three-fold. First, she once gave me a good ribbing for my poor trivia knowledge at a faculty-student mixer. Second, she was the author of my Canadian history textbook – *History of the Canadian Peoples* (affectionately known by the names of its two co-authors “Conrad and Finkel”):¹ And third, just before she left Acadia I caught her talking about history on a national television program as she modeled civically engaged scholarship. From these experiences I learned that good history carefully balances detail and context with an eye to its significance in shaping the present and future. Without taking a class with her, Conrad had taught me several important lessons about what it means to be a historian; they continue to shape my professional life today.

Conrad's *At the Ocean's Edge: A History of Nova Scotia to Confederation* exemplifies these qualities of Conrad's scholarship.² The book begins with Sylvia Hamilton's evocative poem “Keep On Keepin' On,” a poem about persistence, exclusion, and inclusion in Nova Scotia. Conrad uses Hamilton's work to suggest that the foundation for the province's cultural, social, and political developments lies somewhere between the region's awkward geography (her exact words are on xiv) and the diverse communities that made this place home before 1867. Over the book's 12 chapters, Conrad provides a beautiful narrative that well balances her careful eye for detail with an explanation of the significance of her arguments about Nova Scotia placed in national and

1 Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, *History of the Canadian Peoples: Beginnings to 1867*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1998).

2 Margaret Conrad, *At the Ocean's Edge: A History of Nova Scotia to Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

international contexts. Her book carefully weaves together local events into their broader regional and global significance.

Though its title implies that its subject matter will be geographically and chronologically bound, *At the Ocean's Edge* is expansive in its scope. The first chapter tackles "Ancient History" while the "Afterword" brings the reader through a nuanced discussion of the province's post-Confederation history. Though we might quibble about the necessity of including the region's distant past as part of a book that explains Nova Scotia's early history, a reader would be mistaken if they dismissed the book's powerful "Afterword." It is here where Conrad's argument – that this period matters significantly if we want to understand the province today – is at its strongest. The watchword for this part of the book is "continuity" as the post-Confederation Nova Scotian world built upon the substantial moments of change that occurred over the two centuries preceding the colony's entering Confederation: "It is not that Nova Scotians have resisted making adjustments to national and global trends since 1867, but rather that continuity as much as change has defined the results of the adjustment process [to the industrial age]" (336).

Conrad's chronological scope is matched by her geographical framing. This is a book that forcefully grapples with Nova Scotia's fluid identities and elastic borders. Though the province is a place that we might easily define today by its political and geographical boundaries, Conrad recognizes the legacy of its earlier iterations. Following the work of John Reid (among others), Conrad considers Nova Scotia as a place with multiple meanings – identifying Mi'kma'ki and Acadie as relatively coterminous geopolitical spaces that remain meaningful for many people living in this place today.

In taking this approach, Conrad draws attention to aspects of the region's history often neglected in sweeping overviews of colonial or provincial histories written in the mid-to-late 20th century or earlier. One captivating strategy that she uses is biography. As the reader makes their way through this book, they will be introduced to dozens of the people whose lives shaped, or were shaped by, Nova Scotia's history. In her discussion of the Code Noir and France's enslavement of Africans and their descendants, for example, we learn about Marie-Louise, a woman enslaved by Louis Jouet for 16 years (104) and about the indentured servant Isaac Provender who – at Annapolis – burned his master's home in 1737 and later tried to escape his servitude (114). To discuss Loyalist mobility, Conrad draws on the life of Elizabeth Lichtenstein Johnston who, following her doctor husband, lived in New York, Savannah, Charleston,

Florida, Scotland, and Jamaica until finally settling after her husband's death in Annapolis (170-1). In showing us some Mi'kmaw strategies for addressing the re-populating of Mi'kma'ki during the 19th century, she draws on Paussamigh Pemmeenauweet (Louis-Benjamin Peminuit Paul) who petitioned for land around Sipekne'katik (Shubenacadie) in 1814, called for the banning of alcohol in 1829, and pleaded before Queen Victoria for redress in 1841 because, in his words, "White Man has taken all that was ours" (218, 250). For some readers, these biographies will be familiar. I draw them out, though, because they illustrate part of Conrad's style and the importance she places on lives lived in her analysis.

These biographies illustrate how *At the Ocean's Edge* provides a robust and comprehensive picture of Nova Scotia's history. Partially through life stories, Conrad is able to address the important institutions that structured day-to-day life. And unsurprisingly for readers familiar with her scholarship, Conrad is careful to demonstrate how women, across class and race, have shaped Nova Scotia's history. This is manifest most clearly in her section about 19th-century women's work, where she discusses individuals as varied as prominent Mi'kmaw artist Mary Christianne Paul Morris, elite women who travelled to Massachusetts for schooling, and the life of poor women in Halifax in order to elaborate the variety of experiences women faced during the 19th century (288). Religion is also addressed well, specifically in Chapter Nine, where Conrad argues that it became a key component in how many Nova Scotians identified, focusing specifically on the rising influence of the Baptists, Presbyterians, and Catholics. Similarly, the place of schools, and education more broadly, is attended throughout the book. The subject is returned to time and again. The strongest part of her analysis here is the way that she builds on Daniel Cobb Harvey's mid-20th-century observation that between 1815 and 1835 "the descendants of diverse peoples 'actually began to think like Nova Scotians,'" a point she ties tightly to rising literacy rates and the development of public schooling (238-9).

In addition to its emphasis on Nova Scotia's demographic and cultural diversity, Conrad's book is also not tightly bound by present-day geography constraints. Rather than excluding the histories of New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, for example, *At the Ocean's Edge* emphasizes the inherent interconnections between the Maritime Provinces, arguing that the place we know today as Nova Scotia has played a unique role in defining the region and – reciprocally – how the other colonies/provinces have deeply shaped Nova

Scotia's history, culture, and politics. This is perhaps most clear in the book's first half – before the arrival of the Loyalists – when, for the British, Nova Scotia encompassed the Maritime region as a whole. But the observation applies elsewhere in the book as well, since Conrad often makes comparisons between colonies. The book's final chapter – “Confederation and its Discontents” – is where regional entanglements in the latter period are most apparent. Here Conrad frames Nova Scotia's history around questions of regional interest and the repeal movement.

A strength of this approach, and one that reflects her use of biography, is that it allows Conrad to address the region's diverse peoples and their distinct histories in a way that better represents the past itself rather than the chronological and geographical boundaries we sometimes place upon it. Following her discussion of the New England Planters (140-4), for instance, Conrad intentionally argues for a multicultural perspective that calls attention to the linguistic and religious diversity of late-18th- and 19th-century immigrants. Though attentive to these nuanced differences among European newcomers, Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian history are given special and continuous attention. Apart from the first four chapters, where Mi'kmaw history remains a core part of the discussion, roughly eight per cent of the rest of the book discusses Mi'kmaw interaction with the settler society. Similarly, about ten per cent of the book is dedicated to African Nova Scotian history, the Black Loyalists, or the history of enslavement. The weight of these discussions is all the more significant because the book's final chapter does not discuss these people at all. Conrad explains that “there was no representation [in Charlottetown in 1864] from Cape Breton, southwestern Nova Scotia, or the Annapolis Valley, no farmers, fishermen, or even mercantile interests to speak of, and no Acadians or Roman Catholics in the delegation. African Nova Scotian, Mi'kmaw, and female representatives were beyond imagining” (306).

Challenges arise, though, from taking this approach. As she signals in the book's introduction, Nova Scotia's history is hard to encapsulate in narrative form. In this case, as the book moves along, the dominance of present-day geopolitical definitions of Nova Scotia – tied as they are to the Canadian nation-state – occlude the alternative ways in which people live within this space. We need look no further than the treaty truck houses currently pitched along the banks of the Sipekne'katik (Shubenacadie) and Amaqapskiket (Avon) rivers to see how Mi'kmaw communities continue to see this space as Mi'kma'ki. Likewise, the Acadian Congrès Mondial – next held in Clare and

Argyle (Clargyle!) – stitches together an Acadian world today that has always transcended the geographical spaces defined by British legal customs as Nova Scotia. Mi'kmaw and Acadian history continue well through to the present. In this book, though, substantive discussion about the Acadians ends with their dispersal, and Conrad writes of the Mi'kmaq that, around the same time chronologically, “the odds that Nova Scotia’s original inhabitants could buck the trends working against them were hardly promising” (139) – a sentiment echoed periodically in the chapters that follow.

Consequently, *At the Ocean’s Edge* is vivid in its detail of the lives of the diverse peoples of Mi'kma'ki, Acadie, and Nova Scotia up to the end of after Chapter Eight – “The Great Divide, 1775-1792” – after which this aspect of the book becomes less significant. From the Seven Years’ War to the end of the American Revolution, Conrad argues, “Nova Scotia was brutally reconstructed in the crucible of global warfare” (153), and as the book moves into the 19th century – a period where she signals a “Nova Scotian” identity emerges – the chapters grow longer while discussion of the non-Anglophone population diminishes in scope. By the end of the book, it is only really the wealthy Anglo-Protestant and Catholics who defined Confederation who receive prominent attention.

Part of this can be explained, I think, by observing that this is a book that synthesizes the state of the field, and that scholarship on both the Acadians and the Mi'kmaq is sparse for the first half of the 19th century. This noted, the book would have benefited from a bit more direct engagement with William C. Wicken’s *The Colonization of Mi'kmaw Memory and History* and Michelle Lelièvre’s *Unsettling Mobility*, specifically exploring the continuity of Mi'kmaw memories about the treaty process and the differences between how Mi'kmaq in different parts of Nova Scotia experienced the colonization of their land, mobility, and settlement.³ This potential avenue for discussion is important, given her emphasis that the 1725-1761 treaties “became the legal foundation on which Indigenous rights in the Maritimes stand” (111). Both books point to important threads of continuity in Mi'kma'ki between the 18th and 20th centuries. Similarly, Chris Hodson’s *The Acadian Diaspora* (as well as Jean-François Mouhot’s *Les réfugiés acadiens en France*) might have provided an

3 William C. Wicken, *The Colonization of Mi'kmaw Memory and History, 1794-1928: The King v. Gabriel Sylliboy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Michelle Lelièvre, *Unsettling Mobility: Mediating Mi'kmaw Sovereignty in Post-contact Nova Scotia*, 3rd ed. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017).

avenue for Conrad to have explored patterns of diaspora from the place that became Nova Scotia while also pointing to their continued impact today.⁴ Though they started it too late for Conrad to have included, Gregory Kennedy and Clint Bruce's *Repenser l'Acadie dans le Monde* project is beginning to address these perspectives.⁵

This critique points to what is perhaps the biggest challenge with writing a book about Nova Scotia's early history. Nova Scotia is a specific place for some but – as an idea – remains somewhat foreign to others. Conrad certainly signals this, but she could have made an even stronger contribution had she focused a bit more tightly on Mi'kmaq and Acadian 19th-century histories because, for some people, this space has always been Mi'kma'ki or Acadie. Conceived through these lenses – as Nova Scotia was initially – the geographic and socio-cultural space of the present-day province is just a fraction of what it once was, and perhaps, still could be. Conrad acknowledges this in the book, but I think might be drawn out more directly if a decision is made to print a second edition.

This latter point addresses one area ripe for new analysis. In pointing to the early-to-mid-19th century as a place where a Nova Scotian identity took shape, the arguments Conrad makes beg for deeper engagement with the literature on settler colonialism. Conrad signals to this in the book's beginning, and it would be wrong to read this paragraph as one of critique. To date, there has not been a good study examining the formation of a settler colonial culture in 19th-century Nova Scotia. *At the Ocean's Edge*, though, opens the door to thinking more deeply about this. In her discussion of literacy and public education, for example, the book draws out institutional and textual histories, such as the works of Thomas Chandler Haliburton, Beamish Murdoch, Thomas Akins, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Scholars of settler colonialism and Indigenous Studies have demonstrated how this type of literature and historical preservation has focused on narratives of Indigenous disappearance, while normalizing the arrival of settler colonists as marking a new beginning. Jean O'Brien's *Firsting and Lasting*, for example, lays out how local histories of this era emphasize histories of first settlers, while in their early pages focus on eclipsing Indigenous histories. Though this is well beyond Conrad's scope,

4 Christopher Hodson, *The Acadian Diaspora: An Eighteenth Century History* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jean-François Mouhot, *Les réfugiés acadiens en France, 1758-1785: l'impossible réintégration?* (Quebec, Septentrion, 2009)

5 Gregory Kennedy and Clint Bruce, <https://www.repenserlacadie.com/>.

had she drawn on works like O'Brien's or James Buss's *Winning the West with Words*, which demonstrate how these types of texts worked to make a firm break with Indigenous pasts and establish a foundation upon which settler futures were normalized (and indigenized), I suspect her conclusions in this part of the book might be even more useful for explaining the exclusionary nature of Confederation.⁶ One wonders about how Haliburton, Murdoch, and Akins – and, of course, Longfellow – might hold up to a similar approach about their treatment of colonization and indigeneity. Without a firm base of regional scholarship on this subject from which to build, it would have been a challenge for Conrad to have grappled with this in the book. That said, in reading through it there seems to be good fodder here for future study.

I make these critiques modestly. Knowledgeable readers will recognize that *At the Ocean's Edge* exists in a league of its own. As far as I know, no other historian has tackled such a complicated and extensive history without collaboration. Margaret Conrad has done an exceptional job with this book, revealing not only new insights about the province's early history but also presenting to us a diversity of ways that we might consider its past. Written in an accessible manner, the book will serve well both in the classroom as well as on the coffee table, and researchers will no doubt gain new insights into Nova Scotia's history and find themes and approaches – as I identified above – upon which to build for the future. For all of us, *At the Ocean's Edge* is a testament to the legacy that Margaret Conrad has made on our field of study. She is one of the most influential professors I have ever encountered, even though she never taught me in a class. I suspect that I am not alone.

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⁶ Jean M. O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); James Joseph Buss, *Winning the West with Words: Language and Conquest in the Lower Great Lakes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).