

The Emergence of the Saint John Middle Class in the 1840s

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The Emergence of the Saint John Middle Class in the 1840s

HISTORIANS HAVE BEEN AGONIZINGLY SLOW TO chart the development of urban communities in the Maritimes. In comparison to well-studied cities like Hamilton and Winnipeg in central and western Canada, the stagnation or decline of capital cities and leading towns in the east since the 19th century has made them seem relatively inferior and perhaps unworthy of a place in the historical literature. Left mainly to amateur enthusiasts or fiction writers, what little writing there is consists of badly balanced chronicles or distorted assessments. Professional historians in the Maritimes, encouraged no doubt by the greater opportunities for recognition and sales, seem to have confined their excursions into urban history to the occurrence of anniversaries. Our knowledge of Halifax, for example, benefited from its bicentennial in 1949 but then the momentum was lost. With the loyalist celebrations of the 1980s, Saint John has emerged out of the mists of historical anonymity. Its early history has been analysed by D.G. Bell and its incorporation as Canada's first city in 1785 is one of the reasons for the publication of T.W. Acheson's *Saint John: The Making of a Colonial Urban Community* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1985) exactly 200 years later.

As one of the most distinguished practitioners of the economic and social history of the Maritimes, T.W. Acheson brings an enormous wealth of experience and insight to this foray into urban history. Valuable though his study of colonial Saint John is in many respects, its structure and its lack of focus give the impression that the author was cut off in mid-flight, that the bell rang and he had to lay down his pen before he was entirely finished. Perhaps the Saint John Bicentennial Inc. could wait no longer. Anniversaries have a way of demanding to be observed on time regardless of the usual belatedness of historians. Whatever the circumstances, Acheson's study of Saint John is a book only in the sense that the 12 chapters appear between the same two covers. *Saint John: The Making of a Colonial Urban Community* is a collection of essays masquerading as a book. Although the author provides his own summary of the structure on p. 9, the specific essays divide into four categories. First, chapter one stands on its own as a compelling analysis of the economic basis of pre-industrial and early industrial Saint John, charting the impact on its development of both the timber trade and the stimulation of manufacturing to serve the expanding hinterland. Second, chapters 3, 4, 5 and 12 deal with the people of Saint John. The reader is re-introduced to the great merchants who first appeared in a 1979 article.¹ This emphasis on maleness and the public sphere sets the tone of the discussion since the essays deal only with the articulate and highly visible elements in the community — the adult males — except for a few references to the wider population in a

¹ T.W. Acheson, "The Great Merchant and Economic Development in St. John, 1820-1850", *Acadiensis*, VIII, 2 (Spring 1979), pp.3-27.

demographic analysis of the 1851 population in chapter 12. Chapter 4 examines the artisanal character of Saint John's activist population and chapter 5 outlines the impact of the Irish invasion — both Catholic and Protestant — on the loyalist city. Third, chapters 6, 7 and 8 deal with the moral order of the city, a social phenomenon which clearly intrigues the author. Indeed, it is difficult for the reader to decide whether it is Acheson's enthusiasm for evangelicals or their contemporary significance which warrants the special attention they receive in this collection. Finally, chapters 2, 9, 10 and 11 deal with civic administration and are authoritatively written, albeit with curious omissions. One would have thought a discussion of firefighting, for example, would have been central to the portrayal of a city which burned down so regularly. The failure to organize the themes more tightly produces a considerable amount of repetition which, when combined with the lamentable standard of proof reading, reinforces the impression that the work was hastily completed.

Despite the structural weaknesses, the study is brimming over with delicious information and ideas which reveal not only the talent of the author but the fascinating character of this region's most important 19th century city. Within the context of an urban economy based on timber, marine industries, and artisanal production, serving both international and local markets, and of a civic government, elected by freeman, which was shaped by the local power of the artisan-dominated common council and the provincial interests of the great merchants, the book highlights three developments. The first is the challenge to the merchant elite posed by what Acheson calls the "producers' interest". The second concerns the manifestations of cooperation and rivalry which grew out of the ethno-religious affiliations of the population. The third deals with the nature of civic political power and urban services.

The merchant elite, characterized by a loyalist or Scottish background and wholesaling functions, was the dominant element in the economy and government of Saint John. Before 1840 the merchants placed their faith in the British protectionist system of colonial preferences and navigation acts and promoted the primacy of the timber trade. They controlled all the local institutions of production and power and, though too socially diverse always to maintain a united front, they expressed their common concerns through their chamber of commerce until the onset of the local economic crisis in the 1840s caused by changes in British policy. Then the choice between British-style free trade and New Brunswick protectionism split their ranks and "seriously threatened their hegemony within the city" (p. 64). Thereafter the complexity of social and economic interests never allowed the great merchants again to dominate the life of the city.

Even before that period, however, the commercialists' control over the economy was challenged by the producers' interest, especially the city's native and Irish artisans who had been trained, not in the counting house, but in the workshop. The artisans' power-base was to be found in their respectability, their status as

freeman of the city, their trades solidarity based on social cohesiveness between masters and men, and their opposition to the influence of the great merchants. Leading craftsmen tried to establish four artisanal institutions in the 1830s and 1840s — a whaling company, a mechanics' institute, a bank, and a shipbuilding company — which interfered with the economic and social supremacy of the merchants. The tradesmen's other common enemy was the alien artisan whom they sought to exclude from their closed shop of freeman. This strong protectionist thrust determined artisanal opposition to competitive American imports long before it was politically possible to express the same resentment against the influx of British goods.

The 1840s provided the opportunity for initiatives by the artisans to determine the future orientation of the economy. Caught in a commercial crisis in the early 1840s, they formed in 1844 the Provincial Association dedicated to changing Saint John's economy from a colonial one, based on servicing Britain's need for timber and vessels, to a regional one based on economic diversification. In order to develop the Saint John hinterland for their own benefit, the artisans came out in favour of protection against both British and American manufactures and farm produce. In this campaign they secured during the remainder of the 1840s the support of a significant proportion of the shattered merchant group. The merchants sought to repair the divisiveness in their own ranks in 1849 with the formation of the New Brunswick Colonial Association which evolved a compromise palatable to both protectionists and free-traders: tariffs to encourage domestic industry and reciprocity to promote trade with the United States.

In the meantime the artisans allied with the minor merchants in the cause of temperance, and through their participation in the Sons of Temperance, introduced into the city in 1847, succeeded in temporarily blocking the sale of liquor in Saint John in 1849. The participation of prominent prohibitionists in the reformist Colonial Association had the effect of linking temperance and political reform and thereby strengthened the campaign for legislated prohibition. Civic politics also became a contest between prohibitionists and anti-prohibitionists, resulting in the election of a temperance council in 1853 and a prohibitionist mayor in 1854. None the less, even under the short-lived provincial prohibition act of 1856, total prohibition could not be enforced in the face of the opposition from the leading merchants and other prominent citizens. The employment of Sons of Temperance as informers created new tensions in the community and resulted in a repeal of the legislation as well as a loss of confidence in the extremist tactics of the temperance movement.

The middle class prohibitionists belonged to the evangelical churches, a feature central to the second development traced in the book: the ethnic and religious lines of division and of cooperation within the city. Acheson focuses on the Irish, the Anglicans (called Episcopalians in Saint John), and the evangelicals. The Irish were split between Catholics and Protestants; the Anglicans between evangelicals and high churchmen; and the evangelicals between moderates and

radicals. Disagreement and collaboration occurred within each group and across their lines of separation. The most extreme conflict saw Irish Catholics pitted against Irish Protestants, culminating in a bloody Orange-inspired riot in 1849. The Irish community was also fragmented over the issues of repeal of the Anglo-Irish union and response to the Irish famine immigration and over the appointment of the first Catholic bishop in New Brunswick in 1843.

The degree of anti-Catholicism among Protestants generally was mitigated by the opposition of dissenters to the Church of England establishment which perpetuated inequalities in education, civil rights, and access to office within the city. Yet the leading Saint John clergy of the Church of England belonged to its evangelical wing and were anxious to cooperate with other Protestants in such inter-denominational projects as the British and Foreign Bible Society, Sunday schools, sabbath observance, temperance, and moral reform. They did however insist on having their own denominational schools, and as the first in the field with a monitorial school in 1818, took the lead in the free school movement, much to the chagrin of dissenters who thought Anglican privileges were injurious enough without the added insult of Anglican proselytism. The Anglicans themselves were divided over the question of cooperation with other Protestants, the high church, establishmentarian position gaining strength from both the influx of Irish ultra-Episcopalians and the appointment of a resident bishop in New Brunswick in 1845, whose popularity among evangelicals was certainly not enhanced by the fact that he was a Tractarian.

Although the Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Congregationalists worked together in the evangelical organizations and comprised the largest proportion of the radicals (who were anti-establishmentarian in respect to the Church of England and prohibitionist in regards to the temperance issue), it was not until 1845 that they established an inter-denominational monitorial school on the plan of the British and Foreign School Society and even later that they opened denominational schools for secondary education. This seems to suggest, despite Acheson's insistence on "the divisiveness of the education issue" (p. 167), that their dissatisfaction with the Church of England's prominence in the free school movement must have been fairly minimal. They appear to have followed the British lead, instead of other colonial ones closer to hand, in formulating their anti-establishment position, and their Evangelical Union which produced the New Brunswick Election Society in 1846 was the first organized attempt to secure "equal rights and privileges for all religious groups" (p. 134). The one potentially unifying interest for all religious denominations in the colonial period was the temperance movement to which evangelicals of every hue and Catholics, affected by their own revivalist movement, belonged. Degrees of temperance, including total abstinence and prohibition, were practised, each spawning its own organization. The temporary victory of the prohibitionists demonstrated the strength that the evangelical, middle class forces had achieved in the city by the early 1850s.

The third theme of the study centres on changes in the structure of city government, particularly the common council, the power-base of the producers' interest which also embraced prohibition and evangelicalism. Acheson examines three facets: the nature of the common council, the evolution of the police establishment, and the council's utilization of the private sector to develop city works. The council, which was subject to intense community criticism by 1835, was plagued by constant financial problems and demands for charter reform in the 1840s. Like other institutions in the city, the council faced bankruptcy during the economic crisis of the early 1840s and had to function under a trusteeship dominated by the great merchants for the rest of the decade, a burden which hindered its promotion of economic development and resulted in a protracted struggle within the council over what form of civic reform was desirable. The contestants were the emergent "puritan liberals", drawn from the ranks of minor merchants and artisans, and the traditional "popular conservatives", native and Irish tradesmen of more modest status. In 1848 a new-style reformer, W.H. Needham, was elected to council and with his supporters, described by Acheson as "populist liberals", spearheaded the movement for a city charter that would institute annual mayoralty elections, extension of the franchise, appointment of a stipendiary magistrate, grant of the freeman status to blacks, and the secret ballot in civic elections. After acrimonious debates, compromises among all the parties meant that by 1854 Saint John had a new civic administration that was "more comprehensive, less personal, better organized, less arbitrary but more capable of imposing its will on a broader front" (p. 195). These new features were reflected in the reform of the police establishment; by the late forties a full fledged, professional police force under centralized control and a paid magistrate with legal training had taken over the law and order functions of ward watchmen, constables, and aldermen. Although the role of the council in police matters was weakened in the process, some power was returned to it by the provincial legislature in 1856 in the form of control over the wages and regulation of the police. Besides the civic reform movement, the new police establishment owed its existence to the Irish-inspired social violence of the 1840s.

Threats to the welfare of the citizens from another source also played a role in creating public utilities, particularly sewerage and water. While the city gradually became the owner of the sewerage system promoted by the private interests of householders, the water company, dating from the cholera epidemic of 1832, began as a joint venture between the council and private enterprise. Its lack of profitability soon encouraged the directors to look to the city as a buyer. Before the sale could be completed, the 1842 crisis had descended on the city and the water utility became a purely private enterprise. The water company's attempts to raise funds through a city-administered assessment produced "one of the most acrimonious discussions in the council's history" (p. 208), arousing the ire of the populist conservatives who saw no reason why the populace should pay the price while the merchants reaped the profits. Implementation of the decision by the

Needham reform council to purchase the water company in the late 1840s was delayed until the shock of another cholera epidemic in 1854 and the policies of the provincial executive finally completed the transition. Harbour resources, however, remained in the hands of the merchant elite and the incompatible interests of the council and its waterfront tenants produced a “running war” (p. 200) throughout the colonial period.

To the discussion of these economic, social and political developments, Acheson brings a variety of methodologies which have both their strengths and weaknesses. A number of chapters are simply narrative accounts of chronological events which contain an enormous amount of absorbing detail and aptly illustrate specific interests and tensions within the community. But these chapters — on education and policing, for example — are not analytic and, given the overall lack of structure and focus in the book, are not well integrated into the discussion as a whole. Another methodology employed is quantitative analysis. Acheson samples the statistics in the 1851 census to present a profile of the two major economic groups of merchants and artisans. He also devotes a final chapter to the exploration of household structure, ethnicity and occupation in 1851. But as the census occurs at the end of the period with which he purports to be dealing and cannot be compared with any other relevant census, this chapter seems more like an appendix than an integral part of the study. Finally, Acheson gives considerable weight to comparative analysis which is extremely compelling but unevenly employed. In the introductions to his chapters and scattered elsewhere he situates what was occurring in Saint John within the wider context of Canadian, North American and overseas developments based on his reading of a wide and impressive range of international literature on urban history. Yet he ignores the regional comparative context, at least in so far as the social dimensions of colonial Saint John are concerned. This diminishes the value of his study as a contribution to Maritime studies. It would have been fascinating to read Acheson’s analysis of the contrasts between Saint John and Halifax in the areas of Irish social mobility and evangelical and educational reform for which sufficient material might have been drawn from studies on the Halifax Irish by Terrence Punch, evangelical anti-Catholicism by A. J. B. Johnston, dissenter and Anglican inter-relationships by Susan Buggey, and monitorial free schools by the present reviewer.² The omission is disappointing, not because the quality of these works necessarily approaches Acheson’s, but because teachers spend so much time and

2 T. M. Punch, “The Irish in Halifax, 1836-1871: A Study in Ethnic Assimilation”, M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1976 and *Irish Halifax: The Immigrant Generation, 1815-1859* (Halifax, International Education Center, Saint Mary’s University, n.d.); A. J. B. Johnston, “The ‘Protestant Spirit’ of Colonial Nova Scotia: An Inquiry into Mid-19th-Century Anti-Catholicism”, M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1977 and “Popery and Progress: Anti-Catholicism in Mid-19th-century Nova Scotia”, *Dalhousie Review*, 64, 1 (Spring 1984), pp. 146-63; S. Buggey, “Churchmen and Dissenters: Religious Toleration in Nova Scotia, 1758-1835”, M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1981; J. Fingard, “Attitudes toward the Education of the Poor in Colonial Halifax”, *Acadiensis*, II, 2 (Spring 1972), pp. 15-42.

effort trying to interpret regional similarities and differences to students. Unwittingly the book provides a useful illustration of regional characteristics in this manifestation of Saint John parochialism.

There is of course nothing more aggravating or insulting to an author than to be told about the book he should have written. It may be equally bad mannered to acquaint the author with the book he has written when he does not seem entirely to have made up his own mind on that score. Vague terms like "the making of a colonial urban community" included in the title or the more accurate but banal "remaking" preferred by the author in the text do not provide the effective kind of thread needed to unify individual essays. The focus here could involve one or possibly a combination of two approaches, each of which reflects more accurately the tensions and dynamism occurring within Saint John as it made the transition from town to city. One would be to see the major trend of the first half of the 19th century as the emergence of the middle class, an emphasis that would make sense of the liberal, anti-patrician and evangelical reformism characteristic of economic, social and political change. Another focus which cries out for attention would stress the 1840s as a watershed when the economic crisis of 1841-2 seems to have been the catalyst for almost every significant reform and conflict featured in this study. Despite the author's chronology of 1815-60, the balance of the discussion is overwhelmingly weighted in favour of that decade with details on the earlier and later periods treated more in the nature of prologue and epilogue than accorded equal significance. The book is pre-eminently a study of the response of Saint John to the catastrophes of the 1840s. Those who are misled by the title of the book and go to it looking for material on work, family, housing and neighbourhood will find little to satisfy them. They will at least feel, after a careful reading of this imaginative collection of essays, that those issues left untreated here would have been and, if we are lucky, perhaps still will be perceptively and persuasively discussed by Professor Acheson.

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