

# The Atlantic Provinces in Recent Canadian National Histories

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## The Atlantic Region in Recent Canadian National Histories

### I

The two books under review\* have in common the fact that both were commissioned for the Canadian Centenary Series, perhaps the most ambitious publishing venture ever attempted in the field of Canadian historical writing. The series' avowed objective is to present ". . . the development of those regional communities which have for the past century made up the Canadian nation; . . . an interpretive varied and comprehensive account, at once useful to the student and interesting to the general reader." (from the editors' Forward) It also seems to be assumed that the authors of individual volumes in the series will bring to bear on their writing the most current available scholarship on the various time periods or areas assigned to them. After all, it has now been more than fifty years since the last such co-operative venture was attempted and an updating of our historiographical achievements would certainly seem in order. With thirteen of its eighteen volumes now available, the series is well on the road to completion, only twelve years after the first volume appeared back in 1963.

In spite of their common aims, these two volumes, together covering just over fifty years of Confederation, are very different in both scope and style. This is partially owing to period and available material, but it is equally a product of the very different historical perspectives of their authors. Peter Waite brings to his analysis of the period up to 1896 an over-riding preoccupation with the biographical and eventful. For him, historical development seems to be bounded by the activities of national leaders and the flow of events that surrounded them. The result is an eminently readable book, but less of an analytical *tour de force* than might have been possible. Brown and Cook, on the other hand, seem more concerned with history as a process of institutional and societal development. National leaders are front and centre, as they perhaps deserve to be in a general book of this nature, but there is more in the way of analysis than seems to be available from Waite; much more social, intellectual and economic history as well.

The few forays that these volumes make into the *terra incognita* of Maritime Provinces history do little to dispell the common assumption that nothing of any interest happened in the Maritimes after 1867. The first half century of Confederation has long been rather cavalierly dismissed as a period of trauma

\* P.B. Waite, *Arduous Destiny, Canada, 1874-1896*. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1971 and R.C. Brown and Ramsay Cook, *A Nation Transformed, Canada 1896-1921*. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1974.

for the Maritimes. Gestures towards the declining economy of the area and the supposedly weak and impotent local governments, notable only for their persistent whining over the implications of Confederation, has long been the easy way out of any substantive discussion of what was actually happening in the region during the period. The sometimes difficult adjustments and accommodations made to Confederation within the region were neither so universally reactionary nor as unidimensional as tradition would have us believe. Neither of these books challenges any of these assumptions.

## II

As its title suggests, Professor Waite's *Arduous Destiny: Canada, 1874-1896* is a story of struggle. Taking his cue from a statement by Edward Blake, Waite chronicles the difficult task of nation-building accomplished by our first generation of national politicians. It is a lively story, well told and full of personal glimpses and pithy character sketches; an almost Creightonesque drama of survival against all the odds of geography and the American menace. It is this preoccupation that gives the volume its profoundly political orientation. John A. Macdonald, his antagonists, deputies and successors, parade before us in a startling array of poses and intrigues. We are often told, sometimes for the first time and as often as possible from inside information, just how it happened. For making these revelations, some of them of substance, Professor Waite is to be congratulated.

The backdrop for much of this intrigue is a combination of railroads and scandal, not that the book is in any way muckraking. It opens with the Pacific Scandal and closes with the McGreevy-Langevin affair of the 1890s. Between are sandwiched a series of lesser adventures in both private and public initiative. I suppose scandal was an everyday feature of political life in the 19th century and we should hardly be surprised at the incidence revealed here. To characterize much of it as nation-building may, however, be a bit far-fetched. The wonder should not be that the fledgling nation survived threats of external domination or internal tension, but that it did not succumb to the venality of its political leaders or the rapaciousness of its entrepreneurial elite.

In spite of Professor Waite's opening call for more social and regional history (p. xi) the book makes only passing reference to events outside of Ottawa. For Waite "Life, and history, are a continuum, a seamless texture of future becoming present becoming past. So history is a false order imposed upon an immensely complicated reality; it is arbitrary and doubtless haphazard selection of what really was." (p. 278) If this is so, the range displayed here is terribly limited. Even the excellent chapter on the second Riel Rebellion is written almost entirely from the perspective of Ottawa sources. Sections dealing with Quebec seem entirely structured round the search for a successor to Cartier and the ultimate political comprise; i.e. that finely tuned political machine that would

keep the nation united while preserving the integrity of the Conservative Party.

One area in which Waite has been innovative is in his use of newspapers. He does us a great service in resurrecting the *Grip's* cartoons and the pithiness of the *Nation* and the *Week* editorials. But their constant use wears a bit thin by the end. Some of these quotations could have been left in the drawer if he had substituted a bit more analysis. One wonders if Professor Waite has not carried away by the rhetoric of the politicians and journalists he quotes so effectively. Ending important sections of the book with apt quotations or the aphorism that says it all may make for a pithy narrative but, for example, Sarah Jeanette Duncan rhapsodizing over the splendor of an Ottawa autumn may not be the most effective conclusion to a discussion of the 1885 Riel Rebellion. (p. 174)

Professor Waite does appear to give us more than another author might have on the Maritimes; or is it simply more material about Maritimers? Something generally overlooked by historians of the period is the awesome participation rate of Maritimers in the formation and implementation of the political and developmental strategy of the new nation. Charles Tupper, Leonard Tilley, John S.D. Thompson, George Foster and a host of others occupied the most prominent roles on the federal stage and they claim a fair share of the space in this book, but only in their roles as participants in the nation-building processes the book is devoted to; this to the total exclusion of their roles as regional spokesmen.

Professor Waite seems rather short with Charles Tupper and his son Charles Hibbert, rather too inclined to dismiss them with piquant characterizations drawn from their political enemies or detractors. The Tupper's detractors were legion so there is little problem in finding suitable material, but it seems rather an easy way around some more substantial analysis of Tupper's role as a regional spokesman of the first consequence. Tilley, out of the political firmament for much of the period, was given the opportunity to write cool and penetrating commentaries on events in Ottawa from Government House in Fredericton, which Waite uses to good effect. Thompson, perhaps the most readily quotable of the Maritimers, comes across strongest. Introduced late in the volume, he obviously possessed an uncharacteristic air of detachment much favoured by Waite. (It should not surprise us therefore to note that he is currently engaged with preparing the first substantial biography of Thompson, a book which will undoubtedly set a new standard for biographical writing in the Maritimes.)

Waite's treatment of topics relating to the Maritimes is perhaps less than adequate. Certainly he gives us more than we might have expected from someone more centrally situated. But increased use of Maritime, primarily Halifax, newspapers as bellwethers of national politics cannot replace a

detailed analysis of the area's experience. There is an evocative section on the Maritimes in the "Overview" of Chapter I (pp. 6-7). The New Brunswick School Question is given two pages (pp. 40-42), in the context of the struggle for French-English hegemony between Ontario and Quebec; this in spite of the available M.A. thesis on the topic by Peter Toner and Bill Baker. A mention here and there of passing incidents during the Mackenzie years and the early N.P. period relegate the Maritimes to their normal doldrums.

The Repeal agitation of 1886 in Nova Scotia provides an opportunity for further analysis of the position of the Maritimes in Confederation (pp. 184-188). Here, Waite suggests that changes in the economic structure were in the making as a result of the impact of the National Policy, particularly with reference to the expansion of the coal mining industry of northeastern Nova Scotia. On the repeal question itself he follows the line set down by Colin Howell in his M.A. thesis of 1967, done under Waite's supervision at Dalhousie. Curiously enough, he does not explore the division within the Reform Party in Nova Scotia on the issue, a split which roughly paralleled the economic imbalances that had resulted from Confederation and the N.P. The papers of James W. Carmichael, (housed in the P.A.N.S.) sometimes M.P. for Pictou and one of the most influential merchants in the province reveal something of that split, particularly in a group of letters to Blake and Fielding. But, I suppose a survey only has room for so much, and the eyes of the Ottawa politicians may not present the most distorted picture available. There are flashes of penetration scattered throughout the book and a tremendous feel for the sources along with a judicious balancing of sometimes ambiguous interpretations of the course of events. As such, it rates as a very positive contribution to our knowledge of the period.

### III

In *Canada, 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed*, Ramsay Cook and Craig Brown have given us perhaps the best volume to appear so far in the Centenary Series. Its combination of original scholarship and the skillful assimilation of recent research offers an outstanding example of just what can be attained in writing a survey of this sort. They call it a 'progress report' on the state of historical writing for their particular time period, and they certainly reflect a substantial achievement. The underlying theme of the book is the transformation of Canada from a country of loosely connected regions into a new nation, both in terms of absolute growth and development and in spirit. Unlike other volumes in the series, the book is organized topically, rather than chronologically. While this departure sometimes detracts from the narrative flow of the book, it provides an excellent opportunity for several analytical assessments of high quality. The over-riding theme of onrushing modernity acts as a kind of glue, holding the various elements of the book

together and rendering the volume whole. The editors of the series are to be congratulated for granting the authors such a degree of freedom and for allowing them to write a longer book than any other in the series.

The original and innovative work of both Brown and Cook straddles the period of this book very admirably. Cook's biography of J.W. Dafoe and his many essays on French Canada stand him in good stead, as does his writing on intellectual development during the period. Brown's studies of Canadian-American Relations and the development of external policy are equally impressive and apparent. His current preoccupation, a biography of Sir Robert Borden, is also evident. As in any book of this nature, national events and national leaders are often front and centre, but the range of this book is more than that, and more than the sum total of the researches of its authors as well. Informed chapters on reform movements and the social gospel, labour relations, immigration and the opening of the west, World War I, and a variety of other topics are executed with verve and a penetrating analysis; and while they may lack the panache of Peter Waite, the prose is readable and coherent.

The range displayed in the book is to some extent a result of the authors' dependence upon the results of a large quantity of research, much of it done in the past decade and still in the form of unpublished dissertations. The explosion of research on the period during the last decade is really remarkable. As former colleagues at the University of Toronto and both former editors of the *Canadian Historical Review*, they helped turn historical research on the period towards new and interesting paths of enquiry. The range and depth of this thesis literature and their apparent mastery of it adds an important dimension to the volume. This question of sources is important. The length of the text precluded the publication of a bibliography, save for a brief list of primary manuscript sources and a list of sixty-four theses they consulted. The footnotes serve as an adequate guide to the broad range of printed and unprinted materials they used in putting the book together.

Of the sixty-four theses listed twenty-six were completed at the University of Toronto, most of them within the past ten years. Many of the others cited were completed by students who had spent at least part of their academic careers at the University of Toronto. The range of topics in these theses reflects the changing perspective of our historiography over the past decade; the move to social, business, labour and intellectual history, educational history and a host of other semi-political topics. There are theses on Quebec, Ontario, the prairies and even British Columbia, but not one among those completed at the University of Toronto, or any of the other central Canadian graduate schools for that matter, deals with the Maritimes. Only three theses on Maritime topics are listed, all of them for the M.A. degree and all of them completed at Dalhousie University. (Carman Miller on Sir Frederick Borden; Gordon Brown on the Election of 1911 in Nova Scotia; and Tony MacKenzie

on the Farmer Labour Party in Nova Scotia.) At first glance one is prone to chide the authors for ignoring all the good work being done on Maritime topics. But alas the fault is not theirs. There are very few theses of quality on the period available on the Maritimes. Granted they did miss a couple that might have added something to their analysis, (Hugh Tuck's thesis on the 1917 election in Nova Scotia is one that comes to mind) but they did use most of the available secondary literature.

The absence of theses and important published material, with only a few exceptions, is clearly reflected in the ambiance of the volume. The substantial material on the Maritimes could be easily contained on a single page. Occasional parts of paragraphs mention the fact that something was happening in the Maritimes or that there happened to be a Maritime expression of some phenomenon that was national in its importance; i.e. the 1909 strike among the coal miners in Cape Breton is mentioned in connection with a discussion of evolving attitudes towards labour. Sir Henry Borden, one of the leading public figures of the period may as well have represented the moon as Halifax, for all we find out about him as a regional spokesman or as a representative of the Halifax business community. Perhaps Borden did not play those roles and, perhaps, W.S. Fielding was not concerned with Maritime affairs after his call to Ottawa, but I doubt it.

#### IV

The real question left begging in this connection is whether we could have expected more from the authors on the Maritimes? What kinds of sources and what kinds of themes might they have approached? This is not an easy question. Major thematic approaches have been worked out for other areas of the country, especially the west, but there has been no similar treatment for the Maritimes by historians. Economist S.A. Saunders gathered together a great mass of material for the various royal commissions of the 1920s and 1930s and it might have been used with some effect. But most of our available secondary material runs to the anecdotal or incidental. With diligence, the authors of both books might have achieved more on the Maritimes.

Historical writing about the Maritimes has long suffered from a type of conquest hypothesis. Confederation marked the end of interest for most of our historians, preoccupied as they were with the achievements of the "Golden Age" that just managed to precede the arrival of Confederation. The late Frank Underhill's celebrated assertion that nothing of consequence ever happened in the Maritimes, delivered with specific reference to the post-Confederation period, was certainly apt when it was delivered in 1962; particularly when one considers the dearth of material that was available for any sort of assessment at that time. That such an assertion could be made

with the same degree of certainty today is at least questionable, if the recent activity in the field is any indication. The 're-awakening' called forth by George Rawlyk six years ago has not yet resulted in a substantive body of secondary literature on the post-Confederation period, but we have seen the commencement and completion of several theses dealing squarely with a variety of topics. Since the inception of *Acadiensis*, there has also been a fair sprinkling of articles dealing with post-Confederation material.

The Atlantic Canada Studies Conference held in Fredericton last March revealed something of this new-found interest in the last century. Eleven of the fourteen papers presented at that conference focussed attention almost exclusively on the post-Confederation period, and the organizers could easily have gotten together another dozen papers from work currently in progress. And that work is far removed from the more traditional approaches usually associated with the region. Work is being carried out in labour, urban, social and a variety of other non-political types of historical inquiry. All this bodes well for the future of Maritime or Atlantic Provinces Studies. We should be able to anticipate a steady stream of high quality material on a variety of topics; so that the ignorance of the Maritimes displayed in the two books reviewed above will no longer be excusable.

Surveys of the sort written for the Centenary Series are always the most difficult to write. Their authors have to rely heavily on the work of others and attempt to balance their interpretations and judgments to 'cover the field'. It is a thankless task for the most part, since selection must inevitably had to a certain amount of distortion. The imbalance of both volumes in favour of national over regional approaches is understandable. There is always a delay factor regarding the impact of the most current research on survey literature. That this is so painfully evident in the work of Waite, Brown and Cook is unfortunate, but thankfully there will never again be the same excuse for selling the Maritimes so short.

D.A. MUISE

## Three Books on Canada's Economy

*Foreign Investment in Canada, Getting It Back and Capitalism and the National Question in Canada*\* have something in common since they all deal *inter alia* with Canada's dependence, economic and other, upon the United States. But their approaches are quite different.

\* *FOREIGN INVESTMENT IN CANADA*, by John Fayerweather (New York, International Arts and Sciences Press, 1973); *GETTING IT BACK*, edited by Abraham Rotstein and Gary Lax (Toronto, Clarke Irwin, 1974); *CAPITALISM AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN CANADA*, edited by Gary Teeple (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1972).