

## Recent New Brunswick Political Historiography: Views from the Academy and the Back Room

Michael Hatfield

Volume 6, Number 2, Spring 1977

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad6\\_2rv04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad6_2rv04)

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

### ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Hatfield, M. (1977). Review of [Recent New Brunswick Political Historiography:: Views from the Academy and the Back Room]. *Acadiensis*, 6(2), 129–134.

viding the balanced, detached analysis of the stage on which the actors play their curious roles. They all amply document regional and class differences, the impact of industrialism, the clash of ideologies and the overload of nineteenth-century political institutions which are the major forces and tensions in these years of rapid change and which explain why Canada's leaders performed their roles so badly.

MARG CONRAD

### Recent New Brunswick Political Historiography: Views from the Academy and the Back Room

Ten years ago anyone searching for published material on post-Confederation New Brunswick political history was exploring virtually uncharted territory. Only Katherine MacNaughton's much underrated *The Development of the Theory and Practice of Education in New Brunswick 1784-1900* (Fredericton, 1947), the second volumes of James Hannay's *History of New Brunswick* (Saint John, 1909) and Robert Rumilly's *Histoire des Acadiens* (Ottawa, 1955), and Hugh Thorburn's landmark study of *Politics in New Brunswick* (Toronto, 1961) stood out as patches of cleared land in the otherwise virgin landscape. Between these works and the primary documents all that existed was a handful of scholarly articles and a small collection of graduate history theses in the Harriet Irving Library at the University of New Brunswick. Since 1970, however, and particularly since the refounding of *Acadiensis* in 1972, the pace of both research and writing has quickened markedly. As elsewhere in Canada local and regional history has become not only a legitimate pursuit but a fashionable one as well. Not only have graduate theses and scholarly articles proliferated but a number of books, dealing in whole or in part with post-Confederation New Brunswick political history, have recently been published.

Interestingly, it was the memoirs of a back room politician rather than the scholarly study of an academic which became the first wave in this tide of recent works dealing with New Brunswick politics. In its portrayal of the author's involvement in the events which led to the stunning victory of Hugh John Flemming's Progressive Conservatives in 1952, Dalton Camp's *Gentlemen, Players and Politicians* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1970) combined perception, wit, knowledge, compassion, an unforgettable cast of characters, elegant use of language, vivid detail and just enough partisan rancour to produce a Proustian "remembrance of things past" that is both fascinating and thought-provoking. Here we see politics not as an awesome struggle of great principles or in the cold type of election returns but as an intense and demanding human activity with the capacity to draw out both the

best and worst of those who participate in it. As Camp says in his foreword, what is recorded in this book "is not the chronicle of awesome events, but the memory of how individuals responded to personal crisis, challenge and opportunity, how power affected them, how low they would stoop, or how tall they would stand, in order to conquer". Although what Camp is describing were for him the days of "the first fine careless rapture" of his involvement in politics, the perspective of the description is that of rueful experience. The joy of combat and the sweet taste of unexpected victory in 1952 leap off the page with almost tangible immediacy, but Camp never allows us to forget that the pursuit of power can become an obsession as well as a noble cause and that those who grasp power too often become its servants as well as its masters. Surely Lord Acton's famous dictum on the corruptive effects of power has seldom had a more haunting expression than Camp's assertion that "In the trackless wastes of politics, men lose their purpose, and the stars by which they once steered vanish in the bottomless sky of other men's aspirations. They wander like nomads, from oasis to oasis, quenching their thirst from the wells of power and warming themselves by the abandoned fires of those who have come and gone before" (p. 200).

If for Camp the classic interplay of character and circumstance in the intimate world of New Brunswick politics is grist for reflection on the human condition, for Arthur Doyle in his *Front Benches and Back Rooms* (Toronto, Green Tree, 1976) it is the raw material for gripping historical drama. As an advisor to the present Leader of the Opposition in New Brunswick, Robert Higgins, Doyle is no stranger to the inner workings of provincial politics and he, like Camp, believes that basically politics is people. The story of *Front Benches and Back Rooms* is that of the turbulent era from 1912 to 1927 when scandal, war, prohibition and a colourful generation of political leaders and their journalistic allies combined to keep the political pot boiling almost continuously. This is the story of that generation - of Kidd Flemming, Peter Veniot, Douglas Hazen, Ned Carter, Frank Carvell, Jim Crockett, John Hawkes, James Murray, Walter Foster, George Clarke and William Roberts. It was clearly a labour of love for the author and will be indispensable to any student of New Brunswick political history. Here is a work of meticulous research, careful organization, and dramatic and vivid narrative which catches and holds the reader's interest while unravelling for him the intricacies of some of the most complex events in the political annals of any province, from the Patriotic Potato Scandal to the techniques of rumrunning. For such a book to be as badly printed as this one is shameful. One trusts that there will soon be a second edition in which the numerous typographical errors which mar almost every second page will be corrected.

Not only is *Front Benches and Back Rooms* a delight to read and a major piece of scholarship, it also introduces and deals with a number of themes which seem destined to become the classic ones in New Brunswick political

historiography. These include the evolution of the province's competitive party system, the emergence of ethnically-based political divisions, the rivalry between Irish and Acadian Catholics, the transition from a partisan to a non-partisan press and the ambivalent role of patronage as both the glue of party unity and the source of intra-party factional conflict. It is the great virtue of this book that Doyle deals with these themes through their impact on individual personalities — personalities he turns into memorable characters by letting them speak of themselves and one another in their letters, speeches, editorials and testimony. We see these forces not as abstractions but, in Camp's phrase, as "personal crisis, challenge and opportunity" which some endure, some exploit, some profit from and others are destroyed by. If the book has a weakness aside from the irritating inaccuracies in the introductory chapter,<sup>1</sup> it is Doyle's reluctance to critically examine the material he presents. He sets his scenes, introduces his characters, provides them with sprightly dialogue and virtually lets them tell their own story, fleshed out with enough detail to keep the narrative coherent and in motion. What judgments he makes about their conduct are provided indirectly through his selection of material. The book can thus be given an interpretation by the reader suitable to his own partisan predilections.

It is understandable that given the controversial nature of the material he is dealing with, Doyle would be reluctant to give definite expression to any opinions his research has led him to reach. However, by failing to do so the bias of the sources available to him is given full play. Because there is ample documentary evidence of the internal conflict, the personal intrigue and the inept attempts to get away with various outrageous patronage schemes which characterized the 1912-1917 Conservative administration, Doyle's approach portrays them in a harsh and unflattering light. When describing the Liberal regime which followed, his emphasis shifts to constructive legislation and the problems of prohibition because that is what is on the record. But was that regime really more honest than its Conservative predecessor or did the purge it conducted following the election of 1917 and the all-too-fresh memory of what happened to parties unable to maintain internal discipline simply enable it to be more efficient in covering its tracks? While questions of this kind make one wish that the author had seen fit to make more extensive use of his informed judgement, these quibbles do not detract from the real merit of the book. Readers will look forward with interest to more contributions from Mr. Doyle to the historiography of post-Confederation New Brunswick politics.

It is perhaps unfair to judge J. E. (Ned) Belliveau's *The Splendid Life of*

1 The population of New Brunswick did not fall from 265,000 to 253,000 between 1881 and 1911; it rose from 321,233 to 351,889. *L'Acadien* was not a Conservative newspaper; it was owned by the Liberal Party.

*Albert Smith and the Women He Left Behind* (Windsor, N.S., Lancelot Press, 1976) as a work of political history. Belliveau, a former aide to Senator Louis Robichaud during the latter's term as Premier, is on to quite another theme — the decline in public usefulness of a family descended from the man who led the anti-Confederation movement in New Brunswick and was a dominant figure in its politics for thirty years. And in tracing that decline the book has its best moments, especially in its sensitive portrayal of the last of the Smith clan, Carolyn DeLancy (Cowl) Torrie. Unfortunately, the book's treatment of Smith himself is almost melodramatic in its partisanship and hero worship. In Belliveau's eyes the "Lion of Westmorland" was not only a towering figure on the provincial and later the national scene but a flawless leader — "a notably honest man among grasping venal time-servers" (p. 14), the man responsible for every significant achievement in New Brunswick political development from the founding of the Liberal Party to the establishment of responsible government. He is even credited with the founding of the University of New Brunswick on the ingenious grounds that he was instrumental in voting down the grant to its Anglican-connected predecessor, Kings College. Those who oppose him do so from ulterior motives of bigotry or to serve vested interests. Apparently to further enhance Smith's stature, Belliveau even resorts to some far-fetched comparisons between Smith and former Premier Robichaud. We are told, for instance, that Smith favoured the organization of county governments on a voluntary basis and that "a century later Louis Robichaud was doing much the same thing in a different way" (p. 34). What Robichaud was doing a century later was dissolving the county governments which Smith had helped to create. In short, this is not a book to read if you want to deepen your understanding of Albert Smith. But it is must reading if you want to find out what happened to his family. A simultaneous contempt for and fascination with the lifestyle of the later Smiths lends considerable sensitivity to Belliveau's portrayals, a quality notably absent in the treatment of their famous ancestor.

As one might expect, the personal emphasis which is so integral to the approach of Camp, Doyle and Belliveau gives way to concern with the evolution of political structures and the nature of New Brunswick's political culture in a collection of articles edited by three Carleton University political scientists, David Bellamy, Jon Pammit and Donald Rowat, entitled *The Provincial Political Systems: Comparative Essays* (Toronto, Metheun, 1976). The Carleton Collection contains two fine examples of the kind of useful work which can be done in this area. While not specifically applied to New Brunswick, S. J. R. Noel's innovative and perceptive essay on "Leadership and Clientelism", which persuasively advances the thesis that the changing nature of patron-client relationships in the political process has been central to the development and evolution of political structures, clearly provides an interpretive framework which is relevant to this province. Another useful

analytic model is provided in David Bellamy's thoughtful article, "The Atlantic Provinces", which poses a number of stimulating explanations for the persistence of relatively traditional political cultures in Atlantic Canada, based both on survey research and a wide variety of secondary sources. Both should be required reading for those interested in the relation between social mores and political culture in New Brunswick. The references to the province in the rest of the Carleton collection, however, are almost uniformly disappointing. Aside from some interesting bits of data, the comments on New Brunswick tend to be stereotyped, are often inaccurate, and are almost invariably superficial.

Superficiality and inaccuracy are also charges which can unfortunately be laid against Professor Calvin Woodward's brief but ambitiously-titled *The History of New Brunswick Provincial Elections Campaigns and Platforms 1866-1974* (Micromedia Ltd., 1976), which, according to the foreword of Dr. A. G. Bailey, is the first of a two-volume study of post-Confederation New Brunswick political history. This book we are told is to be the skeleton which "in his later study, will be invested with the living tissue necessary to a complete picture of the interplay of political forces over the period of the last century" (p. iv). The significant achievement of this volume is the fact that it contains every political party platform issued in New Brunswick from 1866 to 1974. Although this reviewer would have preferred to see the material in print rather than on microfiche cards, having it in one volume is a considerable step forward. The histories of the provincial election campaigns, however, are little more than explanatory notes to the context in which the platforms were written. It would appear that the only sources Professor Woodward has consulted are the newspapers from which he obtained the platforms. This results not only in pedestrian treatment of the campaigns but inaccuracies. The election results given for 1890, for example, indicate a Blair sweep when in reality he was forced to make a post-election deal with the members for Northumberland to keep his majority. Even more shocking is the complete omission from the account of the 1917 election of any reference to the crucial conscription canvass carried on by the Liberals in the Francophone counties. Simple reference to two masters' theses in the U.N.B. library which were profitably used by Doyle would have prevented both these errors.<sup>2</sup> While Professor Woodward is on more solid ground in his preface which provides a crisp and lucid summary of the main steps in the development of the party system, surely his conclusion that "It was not until

2 The two theses are Michael Gordon, "The Andrew G. Blair Administration and the Abolition of the Legislative Council of New Brunswick, 1882-1892" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1964), and Charles Ferris, "The New Brunswick Elections of 1917" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1974).

1943 that Dominion party lines were impressed on major political parties" (p. 3) gives undue emphasis to convergence in nomenclature when convergence in substance had occurred long before. One hopes that greater depth of research and analysis will mark Professor Woodward's second volume. This one, while performing a vital service in making the party platforms available to scholars, advertises in its title far more than it delivers between the covers.

Clearly post-Confederation New Brunswick political historiography is beginning to come of age. Themes are starting to emerge; patterns are being perceived; necessary documents are being collected in more convenient form; a more sophisticated reservoir of scholarly articles and graduate theses is being accumulated from which to draw comprehensive studies of longer periods. Still to come is an authoritative general study of the whole period such as MacNutt has given us of colonial New Brunswick. But in works such as those of Doyle and Camp and in the articles by Noel and Bellamy we are accumulating the necessary foundation stones for a rich and varied historiographical edifice.

MICHAEL HATFIELD