

Some Thoughts on the D.C.B. and Maritime Historiography

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Reviews/Revues

Some Thoughts on the D.C.B. and Maritime Historiography

The *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* project is now well launched. As volumes I, II, III, IX and X appeared¹, each was greeted with generous applause. There were comments about the few women entries, the absence of a sufficient number of Acadians, and the apparent political-military over-emphasis, but on balance reviewers found much to praise. Given the quantity and quality of the contributors, this is not surprising since the Canadian historical profession was almost duty-bound to extol its own handiwork. But there are other reasons as well to explain the difficulties of criticizing a biographical dictionary. Complaints that a contributor should have offered a more detailed treatment of a particular individual might bring the response that the first draft was far more detailed, before the *D.C.B.* editors went to work on it. A case might be made for the inclusion of a particular figure only to receive the answer that his career was not quite "noteworthy" or "significant" enough to warrant a biographical entry. A volume's failure to develop adequately one theme or feature of a specific era can easily be handled by reference to volume IX's pious hope that "An effort of synthesis for the 19th century as a whole will . . . be the eventual result of the work of our many contributors" (IX, p. viii). Nonetheless, the basic question of what the various volumes are contributing to Canadian historiography, or in this case more specifically to our knowledge of the Maritime provinces, must be asked. Taken together, do the entries shed new light on some of the perennial themes in Maritime history, point the way to neglected areas of inquiry, and embody recent research?

Volumes I, II and III, covering the years up to 1770, offer a blend of gentle revision and polite reconciliation. From the earliest days of Acadia's history treatments of Poutrincourt and his quarrels with the Jesuits have usually come down solidly on one side or the other. Thus Lucien Campeau's Jesuits, Pierre Biard, Gilbert Du Thet and Énemond Massé (I, pp. 94-6, 299 and 497-8), are seen as quite rightly critical of Poutrincourt and Biencourt's apparent approval of Indian baptisms prior to adequate instruction, while Poutrincourt and Biencourt are treated far more sympathetically by Huia Ryder *et al.* (I, pp. 96-102). This reconciliation of the merits of both sides continues when d'Aulnay and La Tour are examined. René Baudry presents a very convincing discussion of d'Aulnay's many contributions to the development of Acadia (I, pp. 502-6), while George MacBeath's biography of Charles de La Tour responds to this challenge with a portrayal of La Tour's consistent loyalty to France until 1656, and his qualities as a "born leader with the happy faculty of making friends and of inspiring faith in his integrity" (I, pp. 592-6).

More controversial is the man sometimes assumed responsible for the Acadian demise in 1755, Charles Lawrence. Dominick Graham's handling of the Nova

¹ George W. Brown, David Hayne and Frances G. Halpenny, *et al.*, eds., *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, I, II, III, IX and X (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1966-1976).

Scotian governor is balanced and instructive (III, pp. 361-6), and he advances an interesting interpretation — it was not New England land hunger that sparked the deportation but lack of interest in the Acadian lands on the part of some New Englanders. It apparently had been decided that, once Beauséjour fell, disloyal Acadians would be forced out and their places taken by New England settlers who would serve as a barrier between Isle Saint Jean, Île Royale and the Acadians on the Nova Scotian peninsula. The “linchpin” of this plan was John Winslow, commander of the Massachusetts troops serving in the Beauséjour campaign, but his eventual bitterness at his own and his men’s treatment caused a loss of interest in settlement.² The beleaguered Lawrence, recently informed of Braddock’s disaster, short of troops, worried about communications with Chignecto, and faced with the Acadian refusal to take an oath of loyalty, accordingly executed the council’s expulsion order. The circumstances of the moment explain what seemed to the men who made it in 1755 a necessary decision.

Attempts are made to understand other Nova Scotian soldier-administrators as well. The “complex, quarrelsome, and unlikeable” Lieutenant Governor Lawrence Armstrong is given some credit for his laborious efforts to keep Nova Scotia at least “nominally British” at a time when England is alleged to have been neglectful, uninterested and lacking a coherent policy for the colony (II, pp. 21-4). Richard Philipps likewise is praised for attempting to awaken the home authorities to their Nova Scotian responsibilities (III, pp. 515-8). The author of these two entries, Maxwell Sutherland, continues his theme of Nova Scotia as a neglected “imperial backwater” in the Paul Mascarene biography (III, pp. 435-40). But why these administrators, other concerned officers, and various aspiring merchants and colonial entrepreneurs were unsuccessful in combatting English lethargy remains unclear. While it is easy to refer to Walpole’s policies, or non-policies, perhaps we have reached the point where a reassessment of the Nova Scotian-Old England relationship in this period is needed to balance Brebner’s long dominant and rather one-sided picture of the colony as “New England’s Outpost”. Several biographies make clear the influence English political changes had on Nova Scotia: Francis Nicholson’s removal owing to his Tory sympathies (II, pp. 496-9), Samuel Vetch’s vindication helped by his Whig friends (II, pp. 650-2), and Lawrence Armstrong’s cultivation of his Newcastle connections to offset Philipps’ intense dislike (II, pp. 21-4). This trans-Atlantic manoeuvring must be linked to the divisions and debates within Nova Scotia, some of which are briefly touched upon but not fully explained. Edward How’s clash with the officers at Canso (III, pp. 297-8) and William Winniett’s attempt to control the Bay of Fundy trade for the benefit of Annapolis (III, pp. 665-6)

² A narrower but similar argument to that developed by George A. Rawlyk, *Nova Scotia’s Massachusetts: A Study of Massachusetts-Nova Scotia Relations 1630-1784* (Montreal, 1973), pp. 204-216.

hint of civil-military and mercantile conflicts rooted in differing conceptions of the proper pattern of development needed in Nova Scotia.

Differing motivations are unfortunately little explored when the *D.C.B.* treats a group to which it has devoted considerable attention, the Indians. Too often, leaders of the native peoples are treated as almost mindless helpmates of the European newcomers. Henri Membertou's willingness to keep watch over the Port Royal habitation is recounted (I, pp. 500-1), but was this a Powhatan-like gesture on his part?³ Likewise Segipt's journey to England to acknowledge the sovereignty of Charles I is explained as "no doubt . . . influenced by Claude De Saint-Étienne de La Tour" (I, p. 605) rather than as revealing an Indian diplomatic shrewdness and flexibility. Brilliantly contrasting with this European-blinkered approach are the biographical entries by Frank T. Siebert Jr. He traces the plight of the Abenakis in examining the career of one of their noted warriors, Mog, who represented a nativist and neutralist party driven to advocate war on the English only when delegations to protest the advance of settlement failed to halt constant encroachment on Indian territory (II, pp. 475-7). Mog was killed in 1724, but Wenemouet (II, pp. 664-6) resurrected the neutralist policy, abandoned the Canadian Abenakis and the French, and sought "an amicable accommodation with the English". Over the long run, this strategy was a failure but the existence of what Gary B. Nash would call a strategy for survival is at least acknowledged.⁴

The existence of such a strategy does not, of course, preclude the possibility of Indian manipulation by "agents of French imperialism" such as the missionaries. And in examining the priests who worked with the Indians, the *D.C.B.* sparkles. The pressure French authorities exerted on the missionaries is revealed in several of Thomas Charland's entries and the fundamental missionary dilemma is developed in his examination of Sébastien Rale (II, pp. 542-5), who "shared the fate of many other missionaries of this era who, willingly or not, found themselves and their work caught up in the larger colonial struggles of France and England in the New World". In the same fashion Micheline Johnson balances Pierre de la Chasse's instigation of the policy of "gifts to the Indians" after 1713, and his tours of the Abenaki missions in French Acadia to see that they remained loyal (III, pp. 329-30), with the activities of Pierre Maillard (III, pp. 415-9). Loyal and actively encouraging the Micmac to war on the English in the 1740s and 1750s, Maillard by 1759 recognized the futility of continued hostilities and treated for peace, co-operating with the British in the pacification of the Micmac and serving as a salaried government agent. The same sort of divided loyalties and concerted

³ Nancy O. Laurie, "Indian Cultural Adjustment to European Civilization", in James M. Smith, ed., *Seventeenth-Century America: Essays in Colonial History* (New York, 1972), pp. 36-60, discusses Powhatan's use of the European presence in Virginia to strengthen the position of his own nation.

⁴ See Gary B. Nash, *Red, White and Black: The Peoples of Early America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974), pp. 239-75.

pressures are found among the priests ministering to the Acadians. Henri Daudin arrived in Acadia in the 1750s determined to rekindle the French loyalties of the Acadians (III, pp. 165-6), while other priests such as La Goudalie, Desenclaves and Chauvreulx (III, pp. 342-3, 256-7, 119-21) took a more realistic and responsible approach. Serving in English Acadia, the latter gentlemen, as Johnson points out, tried to establish a good relationship with the English authorities, but with the outbreak of war in 1744 they found themselves accused of doing too little and suspected of doing too much on behalf of the French cause by the French and English respectively. In reality, all three followed the lead of their Acadian parishioners in taking a neutral stance, with Desenclaves and Chauvreulx going even further in 1749 by urging Acadian acceptance of an English oath of allegiance. Johnson underlines the irony that despite such advisors the expulsion was the eventual Acadian fate.

This spectre of the pastor following the flock, and the flock frequently heading in its own direction, raises the question of who actually were the leaders within Acadian society. Obviously, the clergy at times functioned in this capacity but on too many occasions their views were overlooked. Abbé Justinien Durand's call for an Acadian exodus after 1713 was not heeded (III, p. 207-8), just as clerical opposition to Acadian participation in privateering activities was largely ignored (II, pp. 449-50). It might be assumed that exceptional wealth would bring leadership status but when one such Acadian, Joseph-Nicolas Gautier, actively supported the French cause from 1744 to 1747 only a handful followed his example (III, pp. 254-5). Bernard Pothier explains Gautier's deviant behaviour by the fact that he had spent his youth in France. Yet Gautier had served earlier as an Acadian deputy, as did Abraham Bourg (II, pp. 93-4) and others, and although the importance of the occupants of this office has been stressed by several historians we have as yet no analysis of their activities and accomplishments. The shortcomings of our knowledge of Acadian society clearly emerge, and the same limitations are found in the entries dealing with Île Royale. Those occupied with the construction of Louisbourg are admirably served by F. J. Thorpe's various entries (II, pp. 648-50, for example). The governors, like their Acadian counterparts, are subjected to useful examinations revealing that many of them, in Bernard Pothier's apt quote concerning Saint-Ovide, regarded their positions "only as a gateway to money" (III, pp. 454-7). T.A. Crowley's comments concerning the administrative machinery of Île Royale and several of its lower level officials (III, pp. 386-9 for example) provide a promising indication of the thrust of his research. And yet, although T.J.A. Le Goff (III, pp. 156-8) and Dale Miquelon (III, pp. 216, 501) move beyond the military-administrative parameters with their descriptions of merchant activities, the final picture of Île Royale, like that of Acadia, remains disconcertingly incomplete.

More encouraging is the *D.C.B.*'s elimination of the artificial barriers sometimes erected between Acadia and New France. Too many studies have treated the two colonies in total isolation, or dealt in depth with Quebec and then tacked on

a nominal paragraph or two summarizing Acadian events. In the *D.C.B.* volumes the links between the colonies, especially in the political and religious spheres, are readily apparent. New France's perception of Acadia was perhaps revealed in Governor Vaudreuil's decision that the humiliating marriage of his nephew to the daughter of a former tavern-keeper could only be rectified by the newlyweds' deportation to Île Royale (II, pp. 565-74). Or perhaps it was revealed in the transfer of the notorious François-Marie Perrot to the Acadian governorship after he had blotted his copybook in Montreal (I, pp. 540-2). Do we have an indication of the home authorities' weighing of the respective merits of Acadia and New France when Subercase, destined to be the last governor of Acadia, pleaded for help and received the answer that "the king would abandon the colony if it continues to be such a burden" (II, pp. 35-9)? Both in France and in New France there were periodic attempts to co-ordinate Acadia's development with that of the sister colony, as evidenced by the efforts of Razilly (I, pp. 567-9) and Grandfontaine (I, pp. 61-4) and the plans of Colbert and Talon (I, pp. 614-32). But how determined were the mother country planners and how imaginative and faithful to their instructions were the colonial administrators? On the one hand, Donald J. Horton reveals Quebec Intendant Antoine-Denis Raudot perceptively theorizing about the future of New France and including a vital economic role for what would shortly become Île Royale (II, pp. 549-54). On the other hand, S. Dale Standen's Beauharnois entry uncovers a governor who "bluntly dismissed" Louisbourg "as useless to Canada," and who only grudgingly sent military aid to Acadia in 1745 (III, pp. 41-50). So much for co-ordination and co-operation! Still, the *D.C.B.* at least offers limited glimpses of the mother country and sister colony perceptions and policies vis-a-vis Acadia which have been neglected for too long and badly need detailed study.

Turning to volumes IX and X, as might be expected given the time gap and the quite different nature of the Maritimes by the 1860s and 1870s, thematic continuities are not all that apparent. Indeed a shift in focus, away from groups like the Acadians and Indians, is quite obvious. The Indians, for example, are now viewed largely through biographies of white humanitarians who took an interest in their plight. The Acadians are not much better served. The beginnings of their political and intellectual renaissance might be read into the activities of Amand Landry (X, p. 426) and Fathers Lafrance and Lefebvre (IX, pp. 451-2), but Bernard Pothier's anecdote concerning William End all too appropriately captures the Acadian position. This longtime representative of Gloucester county in the New Brunswick assembly could protest the 1833 fanfare concerning the 50th anniversary of the loyalist arrival and remind his listeners of the English, Scots and Irish contribution, while totally failing to mention the Acadians "who comprised the majority of his constituents" (X, pp. 270-2). One exception to this pattern of historical insensitivity and neglect would be Regis Brun's article on Joseph-Marie Paquet (IX, pp. 615-6). Here we have an interesting picture of Acadian Roman Catholic versus French-Canadian Roman Catholic, a dimension of the tension within New Brunswick Catholicism sometimes overshadowed by the more apparent

Irish Catholic versus Acadian Catholic confrontations. Abbé Paquet's term as parish priest at Shemogue was not a happy one owing to his parishioners' dislike of "Canadian priests", a dislike no doubt stimulated by one Abbé Gagnon's description of his own Acadian parishioners as "fools" who "live in disorder . . . being a racial mixture of Indian, Negro, French, Spanish and even Italian, with all the natural and moral and intellectual defects of their origins".

Friction of this sort was not confined to the Roman Catholic church and dissension within and between churches was found throughout the Maritimes. The intensity of this denominationalism had a profound impact upon the region both politically and socially. The theological niceties of such controversies, the divisions within society sometimes at the root of these disagreements, and the political manifestations and manipulation by politicians of the denominational rivalries deserve further consideration. In Prince Edward Island the importance of the Bible Question in the politics of the 1850s is clearly established in Ian Ross Robertson's contributions on George Coles and William Henry Pope (X, pp. 182-8, 593-9). In Nova Scotia Wendy L. Thorpe uses the James Nutting entry (IX, pp. 601-2) to examine the divisions within St Paul's Church which led the Halifax congregation's more evangelical oriented members to withdraw and eventually to form the Granville Street First Baptist Church. St Paul's would be rocked again in the 1850s by Bishop Hibbert Binney whose changes, inspired by the Oxford movement, rankled conservative members of the congregation. According to K.G. Pryke (X, pp. 6-8), Binney's move to St. Luke's allowed St. Paul's to retreat "into respectable obscurity and parochialism". In New Brunswick J.W.D. Gray led the low church opposition to the Tractarian or Romanizing tendencies which were apparently triumphant as a result of John Medley's consecration as bishop of Fredericton in 1845. Geneviève Jain feels Medley's decision to place his see in Fredericton rather than Saint John aroused the port city's élite and thus the conflict was "more than a theological dispute; it reflects the concerns of a frontier town caught in a centralizing network and losing control over its destiny" (IX, pp. 338-40). A broader comparative analysis of Maritime denominationalism would be useful while, at the local level, a more intense comparative study of the strange hold prophets such as Norman McLeod (IX, pp. 516-7) and Donald McDonald (IX, pp. 480-1) exerted over entire communities could be very rewarding.

Predictably, Maritime politics receives a great deal of attention in volumes IX and X. Ian Ross Robertson's handling of Island politicians is especially suggestive. He argues that Reform leader George Coles was representative of a new élite, capitalists producing or marketing consumer goods who wanted "a healthy internal market with widespread purchasing power" (X, pp. 182-8), which found itself in conflict with the old élite, "which originally served primarily as an intermediary between the absentee landowners of the Island and their tenants" (X, pp. 593-9). Reform measures such as responsible government, an expanded franchise, the universal education system, the voluntary land purchase arrangements, were attempts by these progressive entrepreneurs to break the power of the landlords and

their agents. Hence it is not surprising that on the contentious land question even the Liberals stopped short of some of the more radical proposals; Coles as a "man of property" ruled out forcible seizures while the Tenant Leaguers, as "men of poverty", had no such inhibitions.

That politics was also a contest between élites in New Brunswick is suggested, but not as clearly delineated, in Carl Wallace's biography of Charles Fisher (X, pp. 284-90). Both Wallace and Michael Swift, in the Edward Barron Chandler entry (X, pp. 157-61), seem reluctant to fit New Brunswick into any all-encompassing British North American political mould. Part of the reason for the exaggerated reputation enjoyed by Lemuel Allan Wilmot, according to Wallace (X, pp. 709-14), was James Hannay's willing response to the requirements of the *Makers of Canada* series: "Its preoccupation with responsible government as the great Canadian achievement assumed a Howe or a Baldwin in New Brunswick and Hannay obligingly produced Wilmot". If these Canadian and Nova Scotian conceptualizations are inappropriate to explain the New Brunswick experience, how can the essence of its politics be approached and understood? Swift speaks of a "benevolent patriarchal form of government" and hints at the log rolling, pork barrel politics of the assembly, while Wallace accepts the spoils system as a reality of New Brunswick political life. Although it may appear profoundly obvious, have we an adequate understanding of the impact a patriarchal, pork barrel, patronage oriented brand of politics had on the politicians and the electorate, in sum, on the political culture of New Brunswick? Examples, assumptions and descriptions of patronage are abundant, but systematic analysis and a convincing explanation of its implications are in short supply.

Nova Scotian politics in this period was dominated by Joseph Howe and the all too familiar benchmarks of his career are faithfully recited (X, pp. 362-70) in a somewhat disappointing entry. David Sutherland's treatment of James W. Johnston (X, pp. 383-8), on the other hand, is a stimulating reconsideration. While Johnston's brand of Toryism at times demonstrated an imaginative capacity for change, he is seen as "a survivor of the old regime" and this theme of the old order passing away, of a Nova Scotia suffering considerable stress and strain as the need for change became increasingly obvious, crops up in other entries. Indeed, the thin veneer of Nova Scotia's supposedly "Golden Age" emerges when its entrepreneurial leaders are examined. In her Sir Samuel Cunard entry (IX, pp. 172-86), Phyllis Blakeley applauds the coming of age in the 1820s of the young entrepreneurs, such as Cunard and Enos Collins, the "native Nova Scotians" who "began to dominate the business scene". But by the end of his career, where do we find Cunard and his fortune? "He was one of the first native Nova Scotians to build a business empire", writes Miss Blakeley, "but, like the successful British businessmen and officials who made their fortunes in the colonies, he retired to England where his descendants settled". To judge from K.G. Pryke's observations on William Murdoch's removal to London, this was a perfectly acceptable practice (IX, pp. 586-7). Was this loss of talent and capital more than offset by the

adventurous risk-takers left behind? Mather Byles Almon amassed a considerable fortune but desired an assured return and was reluctant "to invest directly in provincial companies" (X, pp. 6-8); William Blowers Bliss was "shrewd enough to invest his capital in bank and railway stocks rather than in shipping" (X, pp. 72-3); and it was rumoured that early in his career Enos Collins' "American investments equalled his holdings in Nova Scotia" (X, pp. 188-90). In addition, both Collins and Almon are portrayed as men sadly out of touch with the world around them in the later stages of their careers. Perhaps the rather unsavoury Benjamin Weir was more representative of Nova Scotian entrepreneurs and, as David Sutherland points out, he did perceive "the dry rot of technological obsolescence in Nova Scotia's 'Golden Age'" (IX, pp. 838-41). Is this evidence that the exodus of talent and capital and the arrival of a cautious unadventurous business mentality, sometimes linked with the post-confederation decades, was actually well underway in the pre-confederation period at the peak of the "Golden Age"?

Are the much praised Maritime intellectual advances of this period also somewhat tarnished? Alfred G. Bailey reports James Robb's discovery, after his 1836 appointment to King's College, Fredericton, that there was little interest in scholarly pursuits, but proceeds to explain that "Some decline in its intellectual tone had occurred as the older generation of loyalists passed away and the materialism of the timber trade came to predominate" (IX, pp. 665-6). Bailey obviously feels the work of individuals such as Marshall d'Avray (X, pp. 497-8) did much to reverse this downward slide. Trust Richard Wilbur to present the opposition case! Discussing John Gregory's battle with d'Avray (IX, pp. 340-1), Wilbur finds some validity in Gregory's charge that d'Avray was an elitist. Gregory's criticisms, Wilbur feels, cannot be dismissed as the complaints of an "over-zealous parent" but must be considered "as a part of a widespread discontent with an education system which served the wealthy at the expense of the bulk of the population".

Intellectual limitations in a slightly different form are emphasized in Charles MacKinnon's assessment of Robert Foulis' career (IX, p. 277): "He had been truly a man of great genius, but unfortunately the Saint John environment did not nurture scientific and technological endeavour". Similarly the brilliant discoveries of Abraham Gesner found, at least for a brief period, a more receptive and rewarding response outside the Maritimes (IX, pp. 308-12). The importance of technological expertise drawn from outside the region is demonstrated when David Frank argues that English engineers and deputies of the General Mining Association deserve a major share of the credit for the inauguration of the "industrial revolution in Nova Scotia" which was taking place in the coalfields (IX, pp. 730-2). Apparently, despite the proliferation of Mechanics' Institutes, the Maritime atmosphere was not all that conducive to scientific and technological advances and there remained a heavy dependence on outside advice and support. Likewise, despite what we have been told of the numerous newspapers and the Nova Scotian pride in the literary achievements of her native sons, there is evidence of indifference as well. Even the genius of Thomas Chandler Haliburton received little Nova Scotian appreciation

during his lifetime. His countrymen, according to Fred Cogswell's excellent entry, were too well acquainted with Haliburton's "social exclusiveness", "over-bearing ways", and quest "for the privileges of office" to admire the man and his work (IX, pp. 348-57).

Nonetheless, the limitations of this cluster of parochialisms were balanced by an openness, an awareness, a perception of distant horizons and grander aspirations. J. Murray Beck may be right that Joseph Howe "would like best to be remembered for his efforts to rescue his compatriots from the parochialism which besets a small community" (X, pp. 362-70), but Howe was not alone in this struggle. The success of the participants might have been limited, their withdrawals from the field of battle unfortunate, their solutions at times inappropriate or unconvincing, but many of them did appreciate the limitations of the immediate world around them and sought a better order. Of course, they were among the élite of the Maritimes and it remains to be seen whether this pride in what had been achieved, and at the same time a growing sense of uneasiness and insecurity at what remained to be done, was found at all levels of society. By its very nature the *D.C.B.* can deal only with "leading" individuals and whether these individuals adequately reflected society at large remains uncertain. Furthermore, we may very well have been offered a mirror of Maritime moods but the mind is not necessarily reflected in the mirror and that perhaps is the task at hand — to explore the interaction of narrowing parochialism with a broadening cosmopolitanism, of painful renewal from within with prosperous removal abroad, of a well-rooted society with a growing sense of rootlessness and constant change.

To provide a deeper awareness of the complexity of Atlantic Canada in the mid-nineteenth century and in the early colonial years, two periods of Maritime history often assumed over-examined and already explained satisfactorily, is no mean achievement. Yet the *D.C.B.* has done much more. New insights are offered on many occasions both by direct or indirect suggestion of topics worth further consideration and by tantalizing hints of research well underway. The various volumes are undoubtedly uneven. Sometimes old scholars serve up little that is new while newer scholars offer too much that is old. These rare lapses, however, are more than offset by the quality of the vast majority of the entries. The final result is a powerful indication that individual and collective biographical analysis remains one of the most valid instruments in the reconstruction and comprehension of the past. It is to be hoped that future volumes will demonstrate the same high standards set by the *D.C.B.* editors and the same willingness to co-operate with and support this venture on the part of the historical profession. Maritime historiography, sometimes mundane and rarely magnificent, will be the richer for it since the *D.C.B.* is far more frequently magnificent than mundane.

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