

## Nova Scotia's Nineteenth-Century County Histories

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Volume 10, Number 2, Spring 1981

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad10\\_2rv04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad10_2rv04)

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### Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

### ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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### Cite this document

Taylor, M. B. (1981). Nova Scotia's Nineteenth-Century County Histories. *Acadiensis*, 10(2), 159–167.

complexity of the past, and begin to interpret the ordinary landscapes which surround us will we begin to develop the discriminating memory that offers perspective on the present.<sup>22</sup>

STEPHEN HORNSBY AND GRAEME WYNN

22 D.W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes. Geographical Essays* (New York, 1979); W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1970).

### Nova Scotia's Nineteenth-Century County Histories

Since 1967 Mika Publishing of Belleville, Ontario, have reprinted a wide variety of Canadian local and county histories. This programme has been particularly kind to Nova Scotia. Seventeen of its county histories have been reprinted — ten drawn from the nineteenth and seven from the twentieth century. Mika has been so thorough that there are now virtually no major nineteenth-century county histories, and precious few minor ones, left out of print. It would therefore seem a suitable moment to reflect upon the nature and quality of these early works, and the wisdom of their republication.

In their first incarnation, seven of the ten nineteenth-century county histories were contestants for the Akins Historical Prize Essay offered annually from 1864 by King's College, Windsor. The founder of the prize was Thomas Beamish Akins, a native of Nova Scotia, a lawyer by profession, and Commissioner of the Public Records of Nova Scotia from the creation of that position in 1857 until his death in 1891. Akins was dedicated to the preservation of any material which would throw light on the history of his province. This determination was one part patriotism and one part habit of mind, for like many good antiquarians he was a compulsive collector. Akins, who has been described as "the foremost bibliophile of his generation in British North America",<sup>1</sup> advocated the establishment of a provincial archives as early as 1841, and probably wrote his own terms of reference when his job was created sixteen years later. He was a prime mover in the formation of the Nova Scotia Historical Society in 1878, and in the publication of that society's *Collections*. Hardly a single maritime historian, from the time that T.C. Haliburton wrote *An Historical and Statistical Account of Nova Scotia* in 1829, to the end of the century, did not owe Akins a substantial debt.

Akins' approach to history was deeply coloured by his habits as a collector:

1 B.C. Cuthbertson, "Thomas Beamish Akins: British North America's Pioneer Archivist", *Acadiensis*, VII (Autumn 1977), p. 101.

history was the process of making documents permanently accessible.<sup>2</sup> As he wrote to the sympathetic Dominion Archivist, Douglas Brymner, “the public documents of a country are its true history and nothing else”.<sup>3</sup> Although he was known as a fine raconteur with a dry sense of humour,<sup>4</sup> Akins’ written works were large compilations of documents; an editorial hand is visible in their selection, but not in their presentation. The simple recounting of events in chronological order was enough to establish the overarching theme of progress. Subsidiary judgments could be left to the intelligent reader. Whether it was because of his training as a lawyer, or his vocation as an archivist, Akins had confidence in the primacy of unalloyed evidence.

The initiation of the Akins Historical Prize Essay competition was a natural outgrowth of Akins’ exhaustive approach to the collection of historical material. By donating a sum sufficient to yield a prize of \$30.00 per annum, Akins hoped to stimulate the young men of Nova Scotia to ransack county records and memories. As he wrote to the Governors of King’s College, “My attention has been frequently turned to the necessity of collecting and preserving the local Records of the various Counties in the Province, as also those local traditions among the people relating to the commencement and progress of the settlements, which, as time rolls on, are becoming lost to posterity”.<sup>5</sup> To ensure the comprehensive nature of the project, a different county was named as the prize essay topic each year. In a little over a decade Nova Scotian historians would inherit a complete source of local information to complement the provincial and imperial records of Halifax and London.

Large collaborative historical enterprises in Canada have rarely outlived the initial enthusiasm of their founders. If sheer quantity is any indication, this was not the fate of the Akins prize. Before he died, Akins received twenty-two papers, covering fourteen counties, from twenty different authors, to whom sixteen awards were given.<sup>6</sup> Nine of the papers reached print in one form or another; seven of them have been reprinted by Mika.<sup>7</sup> Regrettably, quantity is

2 *Selections from the Public Documents of the Province of Nova Scotia*, edited by Thomas B. Akins (Halifax, 1869), pp. i-ii.

3 Akins to Brymner, 4 June 1883, quoted in Cuthbertson, “Akins”, p. 102.

4 Archibald MacMechan, “A Gentleman of the Old School”, *Halifax Herald*, 31 December 1932.

5 Quoted in *The Calender of King’s College, Windsor, Nova Scotia, 1864* (Halifax, 1864), p. 7.

6 Winners and subjects are detailed in “Akins Prize Essay”, Librarian’s file, University of King’s College, Halifax, Nova Scotia. The original manuscript essays are held in the Treasure Room of the Library of King’s College.

7 The two exceptions, G.G. Patterson’s “History of Victoria County” (prize winner of 1885), and J.W. MacDonald’s “History of Antigonish County”, have only recently been published independently: the former under the title *Patterson’s History of Victoria County*, edited by W. James MacDonald for the College of Cape Breton Press (Sydney, 1978); and the latter in pamphlet form, under its original title, by Formac Ltd. (Antigonish, N.S., 1975). Neither is of exceptional value.

not quality, and few of the entrants met with Akins' whole-hearted approval. He had hoped to arouse a generation of young local historians adhering to his own high standards of research scholarship. Instead, Akins too often received mediocre syntheses of previously published material, or the products of local enthusiasts, keen to pass on anecdotal tales which, however entertaining, were not the stuff of history. During an interview in the year before his death, Akins told the young Archibald MacMechan that the motives and methods of the contestants had defeated "his main intention in founding [the Prize]".<sup>8</sup>

In retrospect, Akins' strictures on the contestants were too harsh. An untravelled native, he had by dint of extraordinary application risen above the provincialism hampering many of his contemporaries.<sup>9</sup> While biographical details are not complete in every particular, the twenty entrants for the Akins prize were an insular group. Probably no more than two were born beyond Nova Scotia; just four hailed from outside the county about which they wrote. All but three took their entire education within the province. Only four seem to have left the province for extended periods of time. If most county historians had limited horizons, they did bring some skills to their task. Two basic prerequisites for writing a county history were an ability to travel within the county and access to the basic sources of documentation in the government offices in Halifax. It is not surprising, then, that the authors were land surveyors (W.A. Calnek, J.F. More), county judges (M.B. DesBrisay, A.W. Savary), ministers (J.R. Campbell, G. Patterson), journalists (W.A. Calnek), and M.L.A.s (M.B. DesBrisay). The wives of two prominent merchants (Mrs. Hart, Mrs. Lawson) also wrote local histories.

For the most part the contestants were not interested in compiling masses of information as a cumulative monument to progress. Their works were more often suffused by the warmer glow of celebration and nostalgia, an oblation to early forefathers. Here, for instance, is what the Rev. J.R. Campbell had to say at the outset of his *A History of the County of Yarmouth* (Saint John, N.B. 1876; reprinted Mika, 1972), Akins prize winner of 1872:

The volume from the nature of the case cannot be expected to be very interesting to many persons unconnected with the County. Compared with the important transactions of great counties, the contents must, to unconcerned readers, appear trivial. There is here no account of great men, or great measures; but simply the common-place records of a young, but growing community, in which there is necessarily much of personal detail . . . . But I venture to think that, as all things are great or small only by comparison, the details of the affairs of this County however insignifi-

8 MacMechan, "A Gentleman of the Old School".

9 Akins is known to have left Nova Scotia only once, that on a short trip to Prince Edward Island, *ibid*: cf. Cuthbertson, "Akins", p. 86.

cant in themselves, are more interesting and more important to its people than are the details of any other limited part of the world (p. viii).

Accordingly, Campbell took as his priority the establishment of lists of first settlers, biographies of the eminent, and the dating of the creation of the institutions of progress (e.g. schools, churches, and town councils) in “the fervent hope that the same good qualities which [have] served to elevate this community, may continue increasingly active” (p. 200).

Campbell’s history had a firm underpinning provided by the considerable research he did into county records, both in Yarmouth and Halifax. Mrs. Harriet Cunningham Hart, in her *History of the County of Guysborough*, followed a similar plan, but with no such basic foundation in documentary investigation.<sup>10</sup> Related to several of the county’s major mercantile families, she relied so often on reminiscence and recollection that her volume hovers dangerously close to family genealogy rather than county history. But the real problem with Mrs. Hart’s history is that it lacks charm. By way of contrast, Mrs. Mary Jane Lawson (née Katzmann) knew how to tell a story. A poet, born at Maroon Hall, Halifax County, Mrs. Lawson had imbibed since childhood the romance of the black Maroons, local tales of jilted lovers, and “pathetic stories . . . of adventure and domestic tragedy”.<sup>11</sup> Mrs. Lawson worked these memories into a series of occasionally fanciful articles entitled “Tales of our Village”, which she published in her own *The Provincial or Halifax Monthly Magazine* in the early 1850s.<sup>12</sup> The author collected the tales as the “History of the Townships of Dartmouth, Preston and Lawrencetown; Halifax County, N.S.”, which won the Akins prize of 1887. The naivety of the essay is so obvious that it disarms the historical sceptic. Unfortunately, upon her death Mrs. Lawson’s family and friends commissioned Harry Piers, the provincial museum curator, to edit and correct the essay for publication. The glow of each pleasant page is doused by the footnotes of the scholar doggedly correcting Mrs. Lawson’s incomplete, semi-fictitious, and occasionally frankly fabulous stories.

In the case of W.A. Calnek and Judge Savary, the marriage of author and editor was much happier. Calnek, whose original essay on Annapolis County won the Akins prize of 1875, was a teacher, journalist, and land surveyor, interested in historical research. Judge Savary used his own solid talents to

10 The prize winner of 1877, Mrs. (James E.) Hart revised and extended her essay, and presented it in a separate manuscript to the Nova Scotia Historical Society in 1914. Part of it appeared in the Society’s *Collections*, XXI (1927), pp. 1-34, but it was not until Mika published it in 1975 that it first appeared whole. Nova Scotia Historical Society Papers, MG 20, vol. 681, #3, PANS.

11 Mrs. William Lawson [Mary Jane Katzmann], *History of the Townships of Dartmouth, Preston and Lawrencetown; Halifax County, N.S.*, edited by Harry Piers (Halifax, 1893; reprinted Mika, 1972), p. 221.

12 Lois Kernaghan, “‘M.J.K.L.’ — A Victorian Contradiction”, *Nova Scotia Historical Quarterly*, V (September 1975), pp. 234-5.

improve this commendable essay by additional compilation and a supplementary volume.<sup>13</sup> Always well thought of, the Calnek/Savary volumes are thoroughly researched, and provide unique biographical details. On the other hand, the authors were fortunate in having the well documented history of the County of Annapolis as their subject, and considering this advantage they did not integrate their material into a sound historical narrative rising above a general episodic form. Isaiah Wilson's research also deserves respect. An eccentric given to surviving "on loaves of stale raisin bread",<sup>14</sup> Wilson began his investigation of his native Digby in 1867, came in second in the Akins prize contest of 1873, and continued to work on his manuscript until at least 1895. He walked hundreds of miles in search of information, including two trips to Halifax. What is especially interesting is his conviction that Digby's history, though local in its sphere, had a general historical lesson to teach, because the intense hardships he described "were the natural experiences of pioneers in all countries".<sup>15</sup> Wilson believed his contemporaries could learn from studying the fortitude of Digby's founders. Nevertheless, *A Geography and History of the County of Digby, Nova Scotia* differed little in execution from other county histories, and conformed to a general type.

None of the county histories dealt with thus far, even those as well researched as Wilson's and Calnek's, greatly advanced Akins' cause of expanding the historical knowledge of Nova Scotia at the local level. The typical county history had a long introduction relating to Acadia spliced from previously published documents or provincial histories. Following the period of French colonization it dissolved into episodic chapters establishing the first families of the county, providing biographies of the eminent, and giving the dates relating to the establishment of schools, churches, towns, and other physical symbols of progress. Buried in these lists one can find valuable and singular pieces of information, but as a general rule neither the interpretative framework nor the documentation provided much of substance with which the provincial historian could work. Part of the difficulty was of Akins' own making. Between his *Selections* and Beamish Murdoch's three volume *History of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1865-67), the local historian had readily available all the documentary and secondary information required for a fulsome historical back-drop. Thus freed, the county historian could concentrate his research on those subjects, largely genealogical, which were closest to his heart, rather than pursuing the gaps Akins' perceived in general historical knowledge. Similarly, whereas Akins

13 W.A. Calnek, *History of the County of Annapolis . . .*, edited and compiled by A.W. Savary (Toronto, 1897; reprinted Mika, 1972); Alfred W. Savary, *Supplement to the History of the County of Annapolis . . .* (Toronto, 1913; reprinted Mika, 1973).

14 Isaiah Wilson, Vertical File, Biography, PANS.

15 Isaiah Wilson, *A Geography and History of the County of Digby, Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1900; reprinted Mika, 1972), pp. ix-x.

had hoped that local historians would undertake to gather what we would call the oral history of their area, the typical county historian turned reminiscence into nostalgic tales, if not fictitious stories. This was true not only of those writing for the Akins prize. James F. More's *The History of Queens County, N.S.* (Halifax, 1873; reprinted Mika, 1972) might be a model of what Akins thought had gone wrong with county histories. As for Thomas Miller's *Historical and Genealogical Record of the First Settlers of Colchester County, down to the present time, compiled from the most authentic sources* (Halifax, 1873; reprinted Mika, 1972), its long ancestral lists would induce ennui in the most hardened genealogist. One simply cannot avoid agreeing with Campbell that a reader's interest in most of Nova Scotia's nineteenth-century county histories would bear a direct relationship to the proximity of his birthplace to the county in question.

There were exceptions. In 1868 Mather Byles DesBrisay won second prize in the Akins contest with his "History of the County of Lunenburg". As a native of the county, its judge, and its M.L.A. (in addition to being sometime immigration agent for the province), DesBrisay was excellently situated to draw upon numerous sources for his information. There was hardly a spot in the county he had not visited, hardly an old-timer he had not consulted, and hardly a document he had not seen. His original essay was not significantly different in form from the general run of county histories, but by the time it passed through its first printing in Halifax in 1870 and to a second edition (Toronto, 1895; reprinted Mika, 1972), it had become a compendium which widened knowledge of the available pool of documents. DesBrisay used this information to establish more than just the names of early settlers. He made a real attempt to recreate the atmosphere of early Lunenburg and outline the difficulties its early settlers encountered. Even more valuable in the long term was his thorough and unembellished collection of the reminiscences of the founders of the county. Although the *History of the County of Lunenburg* remains episodic and intent upon the celebration of ancestors, it does, by virtue of the comprehensive and inclusive nature of its research, rise above the level of the typical county history.

The Rev. George Patterson's "A History of the County of Pictou", Akins prize winner of 1874, alone among the county histories must have met every one of Akins' requirements. Patterson was not a county historian, but an historian who wrote about a county. A bibliophile in his own right, Patterson donated many valuable documents, pamphlets, and books to the Nova Scotia Historical Society, including copies of the papers of Samuel Vetch.<sup>16</sup> Resident at New Glasgow in Pictou County, away from the traditional archival sources in Halifax, Patterson turned what might have been a handicap into an advantage.

16 Patterson to J.T. Bulmer, 2, 13 April 1879, Nova Scotia Historical Society, Correspondence and Financial Papers, MG 20, vol. 684, #28-29; Patterson to the Secretary, 8 January 1892, vol. 686, #231, PANS.

Earlier historians had ignored Pictou and the north shore settlements in their works. Patterson filled this vacuum with a series of books and articles which chronicled the history of a migration, not just of a county. Often called upon to speak in Halifax, Patterson was one of the few credible Nova Scotian historians able to research and write outside of the capital.

Patterson was curious about everything, from archaeology to farming methods to theology. In pursuit of his interests he “ransacked the County and Provincial records”, “teased officials with enquiries”, “plodded . . . through newspaper files”, “interrogated Micmacs”, and “as the Scotch would say, ‘expiscated’ every old man and woman he [had] met in the county for years”.<sup>17</sup> He used his findings to jump past the traditional renditions of Anglo-French rivalries to give an account of British colonization as a process. For this “the most important era in the past of the Province”, Patterson tried to recreate “the very form and pressure of the age” (p. iv). Isaiah Wilson had attempted and failed to achieve the recreation of an age; DesBrisay had come close to it; Patterson alone truly wrestled his material into a coherent and sustained narrative touching all points of colonial life. Akins may have been Patterson’s superior as an antiquarian; he could not approach him as a writer. Patterson even introduced as an interpretative theme the antagonistic relationship between moral strength and material progress. He was thus one of the few nineteenth-century Canadian historians to pause and count the cost of development.

Richard Brown’s *A History of the Island of Cape Breton . . .* (London, 1869; reprinted Mika, 1979) was not an Akins prize essay, was not written by a native of Nova Scotia, and was not typical of county histories. Brown was born in England, became a geologist, and worked for extended periods between 1826 and 1864 for the General Mining Association in Pictou and Cape Breton. When he retired to London, he occupied his leisure by writing a history of the island whose people had treated him so well. The history of this outsider contains some remarkable contrasts to the native product. Brown had no desire to establish genealogy, first families, or celebrate island worthies. Neither did he avoid harsh criticism of early English governors. Most significantly, he supported, against the general aspirations of the inhabitants of Cape Breton, the annexation of the island to Nova Scotia on the general grounds that progress has been enhanced by the larger political unit. He concluded that Cape Breton, considering her natural resources, would “ere long assume the prominent position to which it is justly entitled” (p. 459). Brown’s advantage as an historian was his ability to consult the papers of the imperial government in London. Unfortunately, the potential of this advantage was squandered as he concentrated heavily on the long period of Anglo-French rivalry, which consumed fully three-quarters of his book. As with so many of his contemporary historians in Nova Scotia, Brown

17 Rev. George Patterson, *A History of the County of Pictou, Nova Scotia* (Montreal, 1877; reprinted Mika, 1972), p. iii.



formed his account of this early period by compiling long extracts from previously published primary and secondary accounts.

Brown's method of bringing together long extracts from other sources was in line with trends common in the works of all Nova Scotian historians. Akins' quarrel was not with the method itself, but with the lack of originality in the selections made. The repetitive nature of the county histories has frequently led modern historians to discount the value of their predecessors' achievements. Yet at a time when basic facts about the past were not as near as the closest library or textbook, when most of the relevant books were almost unobtainable, originality lay in bringing a story together for the first time in a convenient form. Originality of expression was a secondary consideration, and might still occasionally be seen as tantamount to tampering with the evidence. We can explain why early historians adopted this method, we can sympathize with their problems, but this does not provide a sound reason for the historian who has good libraries and textbooks to consult these lengthy tomes. Take, for example, the difficulties a modern scholar confronts when using even such a well documented book as DesBrisay's *History of the County of Lunenburg*. W.P. Bell recently ploughed the same ground and found more and better organized documents than DesBrisay had at his command. Unless one reads DesBrisay "in the light of all the other documents now accessible", one could easily be misled.<sup>18</sup> Only the specialist is in a position to evaluate the new and original passages in this work, and judge the credibility of reminiscences DesBrisay recorded.

Specialists aside, is there any point in the general historian returning to works which, at a usual minimum of four hundred pages, require a substantial commitment in time and effort? There is, if one is willing to accept the county histories for what they are — primary documents in the history of Nova Scotia. Read in this way, the county histories tell us much about the province and its reading public. First among the lessons they teach is that the independent, sober, hard-working, yeoman farmer was regarded as the ideal moral and economic foundation of society. The first years of British settlement, a time of testing and sacrifice, were the golden age of this ideal. The preceding era of Anglo-French rivalry was relegated to a realm of romance, a foil against which the stolid achievements of British settlers could be seen. Subsequent years were treated as a time of wavering, as speculators in timber, shipbuilding, and other transient industries all too often distracted the settler from his true vocation. Conscious of a continuing decline in dedication to pioneer values, county historians called on their own generation to emulate the example of their forefathers. The work of Richard Brown excepted, the county histories mentioned here did not represent the past as a preamble to further, inevitable progress. Celebration of past

18 Winthrop Pickard Bell, *The "Foreign Protestants" and the Settlement of Nova Scotia: The History of a Piece of Arrested British Colonial Policy in the Eighteenth Century* (Toronto, 1961), p. 7.

achievements was tinged with concern that energies were flagging. Gone was the optimism which characterized Haliburton's *Account*, Abraham Gesner's surveys, and Joseph Howe's speeches. While the late nineteenth-century histories written in Ontario and Western Canada dwelt on the possibilities of new frontiers, the histories of Nova Scotia, although not pessimistic, exhibit a growing apprehension that the province was losing momentum. The accuracy and objectivity of Nova Scotia's county histories may now be questioned, but not the honesty with which they unselfconsciously expressed the mood of a generation.

When Sir A.G. Archibald expressed the wish that the Akins Historical Prize essays should "embalm and preserve" the history of Nova Scotia, he meant it as an admonition, not a final benediction.<sup>19</sup> After almost a century, there are good reasons for the modern historian to undertake an exhumation. The republication programme of which Nova Scotia's county histories are a part should help remind us of the considerable body of nineteenth-century non-fiction Canadian prose that remains unexamined. The Mika reprints are expensive, but well and advantageously produced in facsimile. It is to be hoped that they will make their way into many public, and not a few private, libraries.

M. BROOK TAYLOR

<sup>19</sup> Sir Adams Archibald, "Inaugural Address", Nova Scotia Historical Society, *Collections* I (1878), p. 32.

## Monuments To Empire: Atlantic Forts and Fortifications

Forts and fortifications are a visible legacy of the economic and strategic value Europeans once attached to Atlantic Canada. In securing their footholds on the seaboard in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, France and England tended to replicate their military experience in Europe. The French, although not without a considerable navy, put greater trust in permanent land defences as seen first at Placentia in Newfoundland and later more fully at Louisbourg. Initially Britain balked at the cost of such construction and emphasized its naval power as a more flexible instrument of military strategy. Yet in response first to the French, and later to the Americans, the British came to fortify their seaboard defences more solidly. The first serious attempt to improve the defences of St. John's occurred after Placentia's fortifications had been strengthened and Iberville had devastated the English settlement in 1696. Halifax was established as a counterpoise to Louisbourg, but its defences remained rudimentary constructs of wood and earth until the war with revolutionary France in the 1790s led the local commander to build redoubts and towers in masonry. After the War of 1812 Britain met the growing challenge