

Cape Breton: History and Tradition

Hugh Tuck

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Finally, it must be said that *Timber Colony* is a book which is a pleasure to read. Well-designed and accurately proofed, *Timber Colony* also has the benefit of the author's ability to present a wide-ranging amount of evidence in the pages of a relatively short and often elegant collection of historical essays. There is of course a need for more intensive studies of business communities, of agriculture, of the fishery, and of the exploitation of private land, where a good start is being made in studies of individual parishes undertaken by a new generation of graduate students. But the scope and sophistication of work in 19th century New Brunswick history will be immensely aided by the publication of *Timber Colony*. We have waited a very long time for a scholar to come forward to continue the work of W.F. Ganong on the historical geography of the province. Now that Graeme Wynn has put another major stepping stone in place, researchers will be able to see more clearly how to proceed in the direction of a definitive work on the development of the New Brunswick landscape.

MURRAY YOUNG

Cape Breton: History and Tradition

Ten or 15 years ago there were few adequate secondary works on the social and political history of Cape Breton in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Eugene Forsey's study of the coal industry, and Harold Logan's work on the Provincial Workmen's Association were notable exceptions, but by the 1960s both were somewhat dated. There were also a series of royal commission reports, but these were often quite narrowly mission-oriented.¹ Now this is beginning to change. Since 1970 a number of studies on modern Cape Breton have appeared, most of them in article form but a few of book length as well. Indeed, the whole field of Cape Breton studies is expanding, with new work also being done on older and more traditional topics, such as the Loyalists and the French régime. Brian Tennyson's highly useful *Cape Breton: A Bibliography* (Halifax, Department of Education, 1978), which lists work completed to 1976, confirms this development. And Cape Bretoners themselves are becoming more aware of their folk past and culture, and this is reflected in *Cape Breton's Magazine*, which has been publishing since 1972.

¹ Eugene Forsey, *Economic and Social Aspects of the Nova Scotia Coal Industry* (Toronto, 1926); H.A. Logan, *Trade Unions in Canada: Their Development and Functioning* (Toronto, 1948), pp. 158-208, 249-267. Royal Commission reports include: Nova Scotia, *Report of the royal commission on the coal mining industry in Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1926); Canada, *Report of the royal commission on Maritime claims* (Ottawa, 1926); Nova Scotia, *Report of the royal commission respecting the coal mines of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1932).

Early evidence of this trend appears in two collections of papers read before the Old Sydney Society, *Essays in Cape Breton History*, edited by Brian Tennyson (Windsor, Nova Scotia, Lancelot Press, 1973), and Robert J. Morgan, ed., *More Essays in Cape Breton History* (Lancelot Press, 1977). Although these papers sometimes tend more to anecdote than analysis, there is some worthwhile material. The best essay in the Tennyson volume is by Rosemary Hutchinson, who discusses immigration from the Outer Hebridean island of South Uist. This is a rather narrowly focused study which says more about South Uist than Cape Breton, but it does show how different the environments were on the eastern and western Atlantic. Hebridean immigrants found Cape Breton a strange and threatening place, made tolerable largely because land could be owned outright. This was especially important to those displaced by clearances on South Uist in the late 1830s. R.J. Morgan's essay on John Despard, lieutenant-governor of the island for eight of its 36 years as a separate province, is also a sound piece of work which demonstrates that part of the Island's problem during that troubled time was simply incompetent administration. An able exception to the general run of administrators, Despard showed that genuine improvement could be made in almost every sector of the colony's economy and society. The two remaining essays in this small volume deal with themes which the authors developed more fully later. In the Morgan volume, the best piece involving archival research is by Terrance D. Maclean on the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in Nova Scotia. This should be read as a useful corrective to the account of the same subject in Paul MacEwan's *Miners and Steelworkers: Labour in Cape Breton* (Toronto, Hakkert Ltd., 1976), since Maclean shows that MacEwan is incorrect in blaming the split between the Halifax and Cape Breton wings of Nova Scotian democratic socialism on the formation of the New Democratic Party. There are two essays on Sydney in Morgan's book. John A. MacAulay succeeds very well in recreating the ambience of a fairly typical small Canadian town of the 1880s, with one baker, one bank, one newspaper, several churches and "lawyers galore". Commander R.B. Mitchell, R.D., describes Sydney's naval role during the Second World War, when the harbour was a major convoy assembly point. The remaining two essays provide a highly detailed history of the Cape Breton Highlanders and an account of the life of the Reverend Ranna Cossitt, a Loyalist Cape Bretoner who made the serious tactical error of locking horns with Bishop Charles Inglis.

A more recent and far superior collection is *Cape Breton Historical Essays*, edited by Don Macgillivray and Brian Tennyson (Sydney, College of Cape Breton Press, 1980). While it consists largely of essays reprinted from historical journals such as *Acadiensis*, this book is well worth having, since it brings a number of good things together in one place. Planned as a supplement to a course in Cape Breton history at the College of Cape Breton, it is arranged

chronologically, beginning with a useful essay on the French régime by the dean of Maritime historical geographers, Andrew Hill Clark. This is followed by an expert article on the fall of Louisbourg by J.M. Hitsman and C.C.J. Bond, a stimulating essay on Loyalism by Robert J. Morgan, and a vintage D.C. Harvey study of Scottish immigration. It is also useful to have J.S. Martell's "Early Coal Mining in Nova Scotia" readily available. Reflecting contemporary trends, however, fully half of the ten essays in this volume deal with Cape Breton since Confederation, and four of these are the product of recent research.

These four essays all deal in various ways with industrial development. This, of course, is not a new preoccupation for Maritimers. What is new is our understanding of the social and political background to the industrialization of the region. Since the appearance of pioneering studies by Del Muise and T.W. Acheson a decade ago, it has become recognized that Maritimers who supported and promoted Confederation with Canada anticipated that their region would become the industrial heartland of the new Dominion.² To a considerable extent these men based their hopes on Cape Breton's abundant coal supplies. Did Cape Bretoners themselves share these hopes? An essay by Brian Tennyson gives a "qualified affirmative response" to this question, basing this conclusion on a study of J.G. Bourinot, father of the better-known Sir John Bourinot. The senior Bourinot was Cape Breton's most prominent member in the Nova Scotia Assembly in the 1860s. He hedged on the Confederation scheme at first, but eventually supported it because, Tennyson suggests, he saw it as the best way to encourage development of the Cape Breton mines and the utilization of Louisbourg harbour as a shipping outlet for British North America.

Del Muise has contributed the only original essay in this collection, "The Making of an Industrial Community: Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1867-1900". This informative study looks at the social consequences of the growth of mining after Confederation, using, among other things, the 1871 census manuscripts to analyse the work force and population of Cape Breton, especially the South Side coal towns stretching from Sydney Harbour around the coast to Port Morien. This district became the heartland of labour militancy on the Island, and its source lay in "the process of migration and the clannishness of the men and women who made up the new society." Many of them the descendants of Scots who had survived the Highland Clearances and resettlement in the wilds of Cape Breton, these miners had retained strong traditions and family networks on going into the mines. Anyone familiar with the work of E.P. Thompson, Herbert Gutman, and David Montgomery on working class culture

2 D.A. Muise, "Parties and Constituencies: Federal Elections in Nova Scotia, 1867-1896", Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers*, 1971, pp. 183-202; T.W. Acheson, "The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880-1910", *Acadiensis*, I (Spring 1972), pp. 3-28.

and workers' control will not be surprised by the militancy of these miners and their ability to "stand the gaff" during the strike wave of the 1920s.

Don Macgillivray's essay in this volume examines the way the civil and military authorities dealt with this outbreak. By comparison, the government's reaction to the now legendary Winnipeg strike of 1919 seems almost low-key. There was little violence in the first of these strikes in 1922. But more than one thousand soldiers of the regular army, equipped with machine guns and 18-pounder field guns, were sent in to maintain order. In addition, the district commanding officer recommended bringing in the RCMP, two destroyers of the Canadian Navy, a Royal Navy battleship squadron present in Newfoundland waters, and an airplane squadron. In the 1925 strike, a genuinely violent confrontation, almost twice as many armed men occupied the strike zone. Macgillivray suggests that the effect of this use of military power was twofold. First, the fact that it could be made available at any time gave the British Empire Steel Corporation (Besco) an edge over the miners (and steelworkers) in contract negotiations throughout the period. And secondly, it "undoubtedly" increased the influence among the miners of labour radicals, including spokesmen of the Communist Party. In this way, the legislation which authorized military intervention, the Militia Act, "may have contributed" to increasing the very violence it was supposed to prevent. Macgillivray is too cautious in his judgements. This excellent article presents ample evidence to support his conclusions.

Besco president Roy Wolvin was every labourite's favourite whipping boy in the 1920s, and his labour policies are still an easy target for historians. David Frank's article in this collection takes on the more difficult task of analyzing Wolvin's work as an entrepreneur, tracing the complicated negotiations which led to the creation of a holding company whose watered stock, high fixed charges, and preferred stock issues required annual profits of more than eight million dollars. Wolvin pursued two strategies to solve Besco's problems: first, the reduction of labour costs, and second, government assistance. But government aid came too late, and the workers' resistance to wage reductions created an "insuperable obstacle" to Besco's survival. Besco collapsed and disappeared in the late 1920s, and was replaced by a more conservatively run and financially stronger corporation, Dominion Steel and Coal (Dosco). Frank's analysis draws upon a Marxist explanatory model, and makes a very strong case for turning Marx loose on industrial Cape Breton and, indeed, Canada as a whole. He attempts to show that the regional underdevelopment of the Maritimes is a natural consequence of capitalist economic growth, which has served to concentrate and centralize capital in Central Canada. The uneven economic development of Canada, in other words, has meant that Confederation has never fully met the expectations of Maritimers, even at the best of times. In this analysis, the rise and fall of Besco was thus not the "root cause" of Cape Breton's

economic problems after the First World War, but the "occasion" for a "structural turning point" in the Island's economic history which saw its coal and steel industries reduced to the status of reserve capacity for the national energy and steel markets, and its population transformed into a large pool of labour for the national labour market.

Paul MacEwan's *Miners and Steelworkers: Labour in Cape Breton* is a book-length history of the labour movement from the founding of the Provincial Workmen's Association in 1879 to the early 1970s. A book on this topic has been much needed for some time, both because the subject matter is central to the history of modern Cape Breton, and because, up until quite recently Canadian labour historians have tended to ignore the Maritimes.³ MacEwan's book, however, goes only part way towards meeting this need. To begin with, the discussion of the very important formative period before 1921 takes up only 64 of the book's 380 pages, and is sometimes careless and perfunctory. Material from Logan's *Trade Unions in Canada*, moreover, has been "borrowed" without attribution.⁴ The next section of the book deals with the horrifying labour problems of the 1920s and early 1930s. In many ways, this is the most worth-while part of the book, vividly-written and coherent. But the remainder is a let-down, and the last three chapters are tract-like in their denunciations of MacEwan's personal enemies within the NDP and the labour movement. What is more, MacEwan tends to ignore ordinary workers throughout the book. Despite its title, the book contains very little about the actual labour done by miners and steelworkers, and nothing at all about other Cape Breton workers such as fishermen and mill workers; farmers come on stage only in connection with the Farmer-Labour coalition at the end of the First World War.

The most serious flaw in *Miners and Steelworkers*, however, results from MacEwan's strong personal bias against "reds" or anything smacking of a Marxist analysis of Cape Breton society. As Terrance Maclean makes quite clear in his article in *More Essays in Cape Breton History*, the Island's industrial regions, especially during the crisis years of the 1920s, featured quite marked class divisions and a well-developed level of class consciousness among the miners and steelworkers. There existed a hard core of support for the Communist Party which provided dedicated leaders during times of stress, but also divided the working class between moderates and radicals. One does not have to be a Marxist to see this. MacEwan, however, repeatedly minimizes the influence of communism in Cape Breton, and either ignores or attempts to explain away the life-long devotion of his hero J.B. McLachlan to Marxist

3 Martin Robin's *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, 1880-1930* (Kingston, Ont., 1968), for example, does not even list District 26 United Mine Workers of America in the index, despite its history of radicalism and its deep involvement in politics.

4 Compare MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, pp. 9, 12, and Logan, *Trade Unions in Canada*, pp. 168, 169, 173.

ideals. In the process, he reduces this fiery Scotch Bolshevik to little more than a kindly and indignant proto-CCFer, who was taken in by “reds” from Toronto, but who eventually saw through them and broke with the party late in life. Nevertheless, there are also some quite good things in this book. For instance, the portrayal of CCF politician Clarie Gillis is first rate, and there are some colourful descriptions of the events of the 1920s.

Raymond Foote's *The Case of Port Hawkesbury* (Toronto, PMA Books, 1979) contains a good deal of basic reporting. Based on fieldwork in the Canso area between May 1970 and January 1971, the book frequently permits Foote's interviewees to speak for themselves on the economic and social changes which followed the Stanfield government's “great leap forward” of the 1960s. Much of this book is not history, but it contains a good deal of the raw material of history.

Port Hawkesbury was a town in slow decline in the late 1950s. The transition from steam to diesel power early in the decade closed down a locomotive repair shop, and the completion of the Canso Causeway in 1955 eliminated the ferry service. Area leaders reacted by forming a development association which succeeded in attracting a Swedish-owned pulp mill which employed about 100 men. The former railway shop workers and ferry hands had little difficulty learning the ropes at their new jobs in the mill. The causeway, however, had the unexpected effect of creating a huge, ice-free, deep water harbour on the Atlantic side of the Strait of Canso which might easily accommodate the largest of the new supertankers. Government planners in Halifax found these circumstances irresistible. They produced a large-scale plan for the economic development of the entire Canso region: an oil refinery, deep-water port facilities, a thermal generating plant, and expansion of the pulp mill. There would also be a heavy water plant at Point Tupper, and unemployed mine workers would be retrained to do much of the construction work. Roy Wolvin would have been right at home, and Joey Smallwood must have watched in envy from across the Cabot Strait. As part of the plan, Port Hawkesbury and the other towns in the region were to be put under the direct control of the Community Planning Division of the provincial Department of Municipal Affairs. The aim was to re-design the town in order (as Foote puts it) “to produce a community aesthetically pleasing and commercially viable according to the standards of the planners.” The local people, who had shown their energy and ability by attracting a “commercially viable” pulp mill to the region earlier, were thus excluded from any important role in planning the region's future economic and social development. Local officials, however, would still be expected to raise the funds, by taxation or other means, to provide the services for this expansion.

Ultimately, the scheme was not a success, but, as Foote shows, the boom-time construction period also had its failures. Perhaps the most unexpected of these resulted from the attempt to convert miners into construction workers. Super-

visors had to cope with repeated wildcat strikes and the propensity of the former miners to go hunting or fishing in good weather. Foote suggests that these men simply lacked commitment to jobs which promised to be temporary, but an additional explanation emerges from his analysis: these men brought their work habits, their attitudes and their traditions with them from the coal fields. Mining is dangerous work, as is (to a lesser extent perhaps) construction work. But there any close similarities end. Construction work is run on a tight schedule under close supervision. Mine schedules are less tight, and supervision is less close (although modern mechanized mining has undoubtedly reduced the amount of workers' control present in the days of hand pick and black powder). Moreover, the ex-miners had long since evolved ways of thwarting speed-ups and pushy bosses, and the strike was a well-tested weapon. How could a construction superintendent from prosperous Ontario cope with men whose fathers or grandfathers had fought "Roy the Wolf"?

Foote has some valuable things to say in this book, but unfortunately his voice is muffled by the jargon, of 1960s sociology, and his narrative is clotted by scholarly obeisances to Talcott Parsons, Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies and the like. Foote does not need these luminaries. Indeed, they get in his way with their emphasis upon status and social stratification, and their denial of the realities of class.

There is nothing quite so self-consciously scholarly as this in A.A. Mackenzie's *The Irish in Cape Breton* (Antigonish, Formac Publishing Company Limited, 1979). Mackenzie has an easy writing style and a way with a good story, talents well-suited to this book, which was sponsored by the Irish Benevolent Society of Cape Breton. He is largely successful in achieving his primary objective — to show that the Cape Breton Irish, while small in numbers, have made a significant contribution to the life and history of the Island. There have never been many Irish in Cape Breton, but they have been there for a long time. Mackenzie may be pushing his evidence a little far for the early period in placing the Irish on a par with the French as "Old Inhabitants". But in French Louisbourg he has unearthed a genuine Irish presence, mostly servants and craftsmen, and he has shown that the Irish were on the Island in significant numbers after the English conquest, and before the huge Scottish immigration in the nineteenth century made minorities of all other ethnic groups. Interestingly, Cape Breton was never a place of heavy Irish settlement as were New Brunswick, Canada, and nearby Newfoundland. Moreover, many Cape Breton Irish arrived after a lengthy stop-over in Newfoundland. Mackenzie suggests that this was because the Irish tended to become labourers or industrial workers in coming to the New World, since the Irish rural experience did not equip them for North American farming conditions. Early Cape Breton, in other words, simply did not suit them. This explanation, however, does not make it clear why an even harsher Newfoundland environment

attracted them in some numbers. Perhaps a partial answer is the absence on the island of a major commercial seaport like St. John's, to provide employment. But as Mackenzie shows, the Cape Breton Irish community included an "inordinately large number" of local merchants, men of substance in their communities, who gave the Irish political and economic power out of proportion to their number.

Mackenzie's book reflects the increasing popular interest of Cape Bretoners in their past. This is true to an even greater extent of *Down North*, edited by Ronald Caplan (Toronto, Doubleday Canada Limited, 1980), a collection of 52 short articles reprinted from *Cape Breton's Magazine*. Most of these consist of interviews with older Cape Bretoners, who reminisce about past experiences, or demonstrate traditional skills and hand crafts, such as the making of cheese, rope and axe handles, dowsing for water, story-telling, and music making. Many of these skills are clearly on the verge of extinction, since their practitioners are far from young. If it is true, as Caplan claims, "that there is something of the quality of a bearer of tradition in nearly everyone in this book," then Caplan sees himself picking up the torch. The hazard in this kind of exercise, of course, is that nostalgic antiquarianism can overwhelm everything. A transplanted American, Caplan does not entirely escape this emotional trap. But the people he interviews rarely show any sense of loss for the past, or dissatisfaction with the present, displaying instead a cheerful and hard-headed realism about the changes they have seen. One of his interviewees, Titus Tutty of Glace Bay, was 93 when he recalled his life as a handpick coal miner. Tutty went into the mines at 14 and finished up 50 years later. During this time he lost an eye, smashed one hand, broke an ankle, had his skull fractured when a piece of roof came down and, just before retiring, had a knee ripped open to the bone by a chunk of coal. The fundamental toughness of this man and his fellow miners was the reason why Roy Wolvin found the miners' union so hard to break in the twenties. Caplan also looks at crafts and skills which are by no means "past and gone". For example, he has an excellent article on trap fishing, complete with photographs and diagrams, and another on the berthing of supertankers. But his efforts to give the reader an understanding of the characteristic nature of the inhabitants of Cape Breton — what makes them distinctively and consciously Cape Bretoners — depend largely upon an examination of the past.

As many of the other historians discussed here have shown, however, the common people of Cape Breton rarely have had more than a limited ability to influence the fundamental decisions which have shaped their past. These decisions usually have been made by others, or were the consequence of irresistible circumstance, whether the Highland Clearances, the move into the mines in the 19th century, or the centralizing forces of the Canadian economy after Confederation. Yet Cape Bretoners have always reacted vigorously to challenge, and have managed to retain possession and control of certain basic things

— their culture and traditions. These are now being preserved in print, and one hopes that this represents not a memorial to something which is soon to disappear, but a new element in the life of a vital and evolving community.

HUGH TUCK

The Canadian Prairie West: A Review of Recent Studies

In a perceptive essay that assessed the state of western Canadian historiography in the mid-1970s, Peter Ward noted that the new work on the west strongly manifested the established presence of a new generation of scholars.¹ This is even more apparent in the studies that have appeared in the past several years. The maturation and promise of prairie historiography bodes well for the larger field of historical enquiry in Canada, for as our understanding of regional development matures, our comprehension of the national experience will be further refined.²

It seems appropriate that the history of the fur trade, the subject that first drew scholars' attention to the western interior, has once more emerged as the most innovative field of west-centered historical enquiry. In the mid-1970s several studies set fur trade historiography on new paths. Arthur Ray appraised the Indians' role in the trade and greatly refined our understanding of the economic relationship between the parties involved;³ John Foster, Frits

1 Peter Ward, "Western Canada: Recent Historical Writing", *Queen's Quarterly*, LXXXV (Summer 1978), pp. 271-288. The helpful comments of colleagues Peter Ward, John Foster, Keith Ralston and Catherine LeGrand are gratefully acknowledged.

2 Nowhere is the vitality and direction of regional enquiry in the prairies more apparent than in the activities of the Canadian Plains Research Center at the University of Regina. Established in 1973, the Center maintains a computerized inventory of prairie researchers and research projects in all disciplines. A research board encourages and coordinates funding and expertise for the development of long-term projects. The Center also sponsors conferences and symposia on topics of special relevance to prairie studies. The Center publishes conference proceedings, occasional papers and manuscripts, as well as a quarterly newsletter, the *Canadian Plains Bulletin*, designed to keep those interested in prairie studies informed of current developments. The growing importance of the Center in prairie studies is apparent in the contents of its semi-annual interdisciplinary journal, *Prairie Forum*. Recent contributors have included Patrick Dunae, John W. Bennett, Alan Artibise, Doug Owsram, P.L. McCormick and Olive Dickason, and some of the subjects presented are: prairie architecture, transportation and western settlement, the Canadian West in British boys' literature, the Red River resistance, the evolution of prairie towns and cities to 1930 and longitudinal research in cultural ecology. The presence of the Plains Research Center, coupled with other activities such as the Calgary-based Western Studies Conference, provides a foundation for regional study unmatched elsewhere in English Canada.

3 Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto, 1974).