

David Alexander's Vision of Canada

Charles Allain, Sandra Barry, Geoff Budden, Angela Crandall, Marilyn Howard, Barbara Jaques, Rosemarie Langhout, Richard McClellan, Moira McLaughlin and Stephen Smith

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next to nothing. The most indefatigable researcher in the world is like a dumb man if he cannot communicate his results. Inability to communicate, indeed, is what keeps so many academic historians mute and inglorious; nobody read the work of the semi-literate, which is what some of them are close to being". That is all true, a fair description of our colleagues and of the profession's determination to go the way of the political scientists into unreadable gobbledegook. So too are Stacey's diatribes against the new social historians who "have had little use for anything else", and on the new fashions in history: "it has been a standing joke among the older generation that to be anybody nowadays you must work on women, North American Indians or blacks; preferably all three. Women's history in particular . . . seems to be in danger of drowning in its own popularity".

In other words, both Stacey and Ferns are curmudgeons, each in his own unique way. They have their likes and their hates and, now that they are in their maturity, they have few qualms about letting off salvos. Both, of course, had little hesitation about letting off broadsides when they were younger too. The heavy shelling of their enemies' trenches makes both books fun to read, and Stacey's is much more of a professional historians' book. Ferns', on the other hand, has its object lessons as well.

J.L. GRANATSTEIN

David Alexander's Vision of Canada

THOSE WHO QUESTION THE SOCIAL "UTILITY" of historical studies would do well to read the nine essays collected in David Alexander, *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays in Canadian Political Economy* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1983). This is not a work of pure history, but it is the thought of a working historian as he addresses problems facing Canada, the Atlantic Provinces, and especially Newfoundland. Compiled after his death in 1980 by his friends and colleagues Eric Sager, Lewis Fischer and Stuart Pierson, this volume reflects the range of David Alexander's intellectual pursuits. Several pieces are academic studies; others are political and social commentaries; one is a convocation address. The old tie between history and philosophy is vigorously reaffirmed in this book as Alexander skilfully integrates economics, politics — even the moral philosophy of Billie Holiday — to sustain his argument. Brought together in order to represent what was best and most enduring in his thought,

these eclectic studies have a clear unifying theme: *Atlantic Canada and Confederation* presents David Alexander's vision of Canada.

Themes of lost opportunity and unrealized potential run through David Alexander's work. There is a pervasive fear of the disintegration of Canada, and a pessimistic reminder that "the European term for a country which has lost effective control of its economy and its intellectual, scientific, and cultural life is 'Canadianization' ". Yet Alexander does more than despair. Unlike many regionalists, he retains some hope in the possibilities of a truly federal government. He insists, for example, that the Canadian problem is not a strong central government wreaking havoc on the hinterlands, but a weak central government so caught up in an economic relationship with the United States that it neglects its responsibilities to the hinterlands. Refusing to see this as the best of all possible Canadas, Alexander asserts that "in the long run a country or a province must have faith that its residents can do more than provide semi-skilled labour and middle-management for international corporations".

In holding out the hope of solutions for the problem of regional underdevelopment in Atlantic Canada, Alexander stands as an example of the position taken by a number of scholars who were influenced by the intellectual developments of the 1960s. The role of detached observer gave way to one of active participant. Some of the concerns of the 1960s — the questions of decentralized versus centralized forms of government, the issue of small versus large economies, and the social importance of culture — had an added significance for a Canadian as they also formed a focus for national attention in this country. Stuart Pierson's reminiscence describes how Alexander came relatively late and by a circuitous route — boyhood in Nanaimo, British Columbia, intellectual history at the University of Washington, history of the industrial revolution at the London School of Economics — to the history of Atlantic Canada. It is perhaps only because of this that he was able to begin to place regional history within a national perspective. Contemporaries of his who went through Canadian graduate schools in the late 1960s and early 1970s and witnessed at close quarters the disintegration of the stridently nationalist Laurentian School, have tended to disavow the heretofore accepted role of the historian as the nurturer of national awareness in Canada. Though scarcely a "nation-building" historian, Alexander believed strongly that economic realities dictate the retention of the Canadian state: "Most of our provinces are too small to maintain national states at a decent standard of comfort and reasonable level of security . . . we must establish new, positive goals for remaining a country and thereby protect the reality, rather than restore the symbols of our particular identities".

The essays in *Atlantic Canada and Confederation* are alive with new ways of looking at an old problem, the causes and consequences of regional underdevelopment. The major focus of the essays is the economic development of Newfoundland before and after its entry into Confederation. He approaches Newfoundland not as a colony, but rather as a country in itself, at least prior to

Confederation, and suggests that her experience can be compared to that of other small maritime states, of which Iceland is the most similar and the most frequently invoked: "The fact that Iceland, a staggeringly impoverished and exploited country in the nineteenth century with no significant commercial fishery before 1890 and with fewer alternative resources than Newfoundland, was nonetheless able to establish itself during this century as an independent and prosperous country on the basis of the North Atlantic fishery invites a fresh examination of the opportunities that existed in Newfoundland".

Much of Alexander's work aimed at laying to rest Harold Innis' interpretation which had largely dismissed the Atlantic Region as the victim of inevitable technological change. His study of the economic decline of Newfoundland led him to conclude that the actions of capitalist entrepreneurs and government representatives have betrayed the interests of the people in the region. Their lack of vision and faith resulted in an economic collapse which need not have been so severe. More importantly, however, Alexander suggested a new perspective from which fresh insights might be gained. Looking beyond the region's staple natural resources to discover why Newfoundland failed to develop an economy which could support its population, he examines the most important and least recognized natural resource — the people. Alexander understood how poverty degraded, diminished and limited those caught in its grip; his study of illiteracy revealed the extent to which this had come to preoccupy and trouble him. Linking economic poverty with illiteracy in 19th century Newfoundland, he notes that countries with fewer natural resources than Newfoundland have prospered and he is thus led to ponder the question of the relationship of illiteracy to the quality of public life and public decision-making.

Alexander's approach also casts doubt on the "Empty Harbours Empty Dreams" view of the effects of Confederation on the Maritime Provinces. According to Alexander, Confederation enabled the Maritimes to sidestep the economic disaster which struck Newfoundland in the early part of the 20th century and allowed the mainland provinces to "maintain a shabby dignity". Alexander tends to view Confederation as a collection of different regions or even nations. In a certain sense, it may be argued, he embraced a "community of communities" concept of Canada, a vision of a multicultural Canada respectful of its various cultures. His Canadian ideal can be seen as the flip side of his distaste for the United States. He was contemptuous of what he regarded as the coarse, materialistic nature of that nation, and this contempt was also directed at those Canadians whom he perceived as having sold out to American interests. For these reasons he admired Newfoundlanders for having attempted, against great odds and possibly at great material cost, to forge an independent course in world economic affairs. But despite these regional sympathies, Alexander remained firmly committed to the Canadian political nation. His economic work had convinced him that "the regions" would be condemned to grinding poverty without Canada. His vision of Canada offered a positive

purpose for Canada, one which united his social conscience with his respect for regional differences.

"There is no easy road to development", Alexander asserts, but he does offer an element of cautious hope for the future of Canada and the Atlantic Provinces. Part of the answer seemed to be found in the strengthening of the central government's powers so that the interests of the weaker regions could be protected. He asks:

Is it possible through public enterprises to restore competition and choice, reverse industrial stagnation, and yet provide the essential economies of scale in finance, purchasing, research, and export marketing? We do not know because we have not thought seriously about these issues for a long time. But we must if we want to see this country at the end of the century with a strong economy and a system of social services secure from financial incapacity and ideological attack.

Alexander felt that Canadian Confederation must work. The main problem of our Confederation was "weakness at the centre", the failure of federalism to support economically and protect our "constituent parts". He saw the solution to this problem not in decentralization and regionalism, but in a central government with "more political power" to "enforce the will of provincial partners". This was the only way "to combine local creativity and local control of productive resources with the benefits of unity".

Alexander never precisely defines the exact shape of his ideal Canada, but its parameters are clear enough: a social democratic state, or at least one with a social conscience, politically and economically independent, responsive to all of its regions but guided by a powerful central government as all modern nations must be. Alexander's vision of Atlantic Canada can only be understood in the context of his social democracy. His work is infused with this spirit; in such pieces as "New Notions of Happiness" and "The Erosion of Social Democracy in Canada" it is explicit. This socialism does not take the form of a Marxist or other class-based analysis, or even the advocacy of monolithic state-run enterprises to restructure the economy; rather it takes the form of an old-fashioned belief that all people are entitled to material dignity and comfort. An economic historian, Alexander was nevertheless well-equipped to see economic problems as problems of what happened to the people of a country, not merely to their productivity and capital. In this approach, society and culture were crucial: pride, self-reliance, uniqueness, self-respect were reasons for shoring up a beleaguered economy. What better purpose could a country have for establishing equitable development policy? In the end, the necessary regional resources would be human ones.

Alexander's critique and his vision are essentially moral. To accept them one must accept not only his socialism, his faith in the essential goodness of man and

the practical application of "decent" principles, but also overlook certain contradictions apparent in his work. Alexander was aware that when he tried to reconcile the disparity between economics and morality his tone was sometimes "intemperate". He insisted that history contains inequities that must be balanced, and that only corrections at the centre can mitigate conditions at the periphery. The latter contention occasionally led him to an over-reliance on Ottawa-bashing. For example, in his discussion of the political economy of the Newfoundland fishery he claimed that the federal government with its "branch plant mentality" protected and internationally marketed western wheat while it allowed the pillage of the Newfoundland fishery by the fleets of the world and refused to see the international export potential of these sovereign waters. This ignores the fact that a substantial portion of Newfoundland's own tax revenue was channelled into the development of landward resource frontiers; the provincial government too had failed to nurture Newfoundland's principal resource. Similarly, in the article "Development and Dependence in Newfoundland, 1880-1970", Alexander barely mentions the role of the merchants in hindering the modernization of the fishing industry. Canadian fishing policy itself is not examined in terms of particular ministers or bureaucrats but is simply described as the actions of "Ottawa". What role did Newfoundland politicians play in determining economic strategy for Newfoundland in both Ottawa and St. John's? Did Maritime politicians side with Newfoundlanders to complain against the injustices dealt to the fishing industry, or were they simply indifferent? And if the federal government's policies undermined the independent fisherman and offered his livelihood to foreign trawlers, Alexander does not really investigate any protest there might have been against such policy changes in the economy, leading the reader to assume that there were none.

Another undeveloped idea in Alexander's essays is his concept of a stronger centralized authority coexisting with independent nations within the state. He argues that a country does not necessarily have to be a nation, but it may contain a number of nations. The idea of an English-Canadian nation and a French-Canadian one has precluded the idea that there are others. Alexander argues that English Canada consists of not one nation but many. The failure of politicians to recognize this fact has led to considerable problems in Canada. He suggests that the individual nation within a state should enhance it and make for a better country. In Alexander's cold, hard world of markets and economies of scale, Confederation resulted from small nations throwing their lot in with larger ones to form a marriage of convenience. But if union provided many economic benefits it may also have exacted a high cost in cultural values and traditional rights. How can regional and national powers be balanced? Can nations co-exist side by side in a strong federal union without the weaker feeling threatened by the stronger, especially in a democratic system based on representation by population? In general terms, difficulties arise in attempting to reconcile an intellectual paradigm with the pragmatic functioning of nations

within a state. While acknowledging the necessity of a strong centre to protect the various regions, Alexander fails to deal adequately with the contradiction that arises when he postulates that the regions are the natural centres of power.

Alexander's work was pioneering work which he was unable to complete. It belongs to that recent, general rebirth in regional history which now preoccupies historians of the region. The essays found in *Atlantic Canada and Confederation* are preliminary works designed to set down and explore certain aspects of regional development. The collection brings together the works of a historian who had a deep feeling of concern not only for Atlantic Canada but also for Canada as a whole. Alexander was at his most eloquent when his historical interpretation merged with his social critique, and the editors of *Atlantic Canada and Confederation* are to be thanked for including several less "academic" selections, which serve to clarify and amplify Alexander's point of view. Though his obvious willingness to be intellectually interventionist raises the bugbear of historical objectivity, Alexander has been justifiably described as a "tough intellectual". The writing collected in *Atlantic Canada and Confederation* testifies to his rigorous standards of research, argument, and writing.

Alexander's economic studies can stand on their academic merits, but his vision is an article of faith. It demands a degree of trust in other Canadians. Yet his is a beautifully articulated, idealistic vision that merits our respect and admiration. While Alexander admits that "none of [the] places in which I have spent my life has encouraged me to develop a strong commitment to Canada as a country", his dissatisfaction is not posited on Confederation itself. Rather, Alexander reminds us again that Confederation has caused dissatisfaction because it lacks ideas and goals that can be shared by each region. In a strange and perhaps reluctant way, Alexander held out the hope that federalism would, as he did himself, dare to be philosophical.

In 1939 in his *Studies in the Economy of the Maritime Provinces*, S.A. Saunders wrote that his discussion of the economy of the Maritime Provinces had been "sombre", but that economic problems to the people who have to grapple with them are necessarily sombre. David Alexander also grappled with these problems in the short years of his historiographic life. Saunders says that he himself merely writes of the problems and is fortunate that he is not being called upon for a solution. Alexander tried to take that step, and this indeed may be where his success lies. Unlike Innis and Saunders and the earlier economic historians, David Alexander represents a later generation which not only depicts the past, but attempts to use history to change the future.

The book ends with a challenge to all who read it, and care about being a part of the country of Canada, to recover our self-respect. Also there is a challenge to accept and appreciate the uniqueness of each nation within our country and work together within a political union. The essays are intended to serve as building blocks in the construction of a new vision for Canadian society. Alexander did not evade the crucial questions which must be resolved if a homogeneous

suffocation is to be avoided, but his answers must await the test of a populace with a transformed consciousness.

CHARLES ALLAIN
SANDRA BARRY
GEOFF BUDDEN
ANGELA CRANDALL
MARILYN HOWARD
BARBARA JAKES
ROSEMARIE LANGHOUT
RICHARD McCLELLAN
MOIRA McLAUGHLIN
STEPHEN SMITH

In Search of a Usable Urban History

ONE OF THE CONTINUING CHARACTERISTICS of Canadian historiography is a commitment to the present. When the unique problems of city growth became a focus of public concern in the late 1960s, Canadian historians turned readily to the study of the urban past. Current attention to urban history in Canada can be dated generally from that time and is contemporaneous with the rise of the heritage movement and campaigns for the preservation of the ecology in our major centres. In the past 15 to 20 years the production of material pertaining to urban history has been overwhelming. Occasionally a list of active scholars and their projects is prepared for *Urban History Review*: a compilation completed in 1976 had 130 entries; an update done in 1980 listed 305 individuals.¹ Urban-related topics now represent a significant proportion of the output of our historical scholarship.

Of course interest in the development of various communities has been widespread for many years and much has been accomplished in the area of local history, a field akin to urban history and at times virtually indistinguishable from it. The difference between the two may lie partly in the skills of the practitioners, but it has more to do with the local historian's concentration on

1 Gilbert A. Stelter, "Current Research in Canadian Urban History", *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, No. 3-75 (February, 1976), pp. 27-36 and *ibid.*, Vol. IX No. 1 (June 1980), pp. 110-28. An interdisciplinary journal concerned with the historical evolution of urban Canada, *UHR* was published by the National Museum of Man with the assistance of the Urban History Committee of the Canadian Historical Association from 1972 to 1983. It is now issued by the Institute of Urban Studies, University of Winnipeg in co-operation with the Canadian Urban History Association.