

## **Parish Perspectives:** Recent Work in Community History within Atlantic Canada

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the social structure with which they had to contend.

If the *D.C.B.* has managed to achieve one of the primary goals of all first-rate biography, to present not only an individual's life but a significant insight into the social, economic and political milieu, the world in which that individual operated, then it should be able to withstand charges of being a series of unrepresentative and elitist tomes. Volume VI has presented in arresting detail a well-crafted tapestry that does indeed do justice to the individuals examined and, at the same time, provides a real insight concerning the shades of loyalism, fragments concerning the plight of the largely inarticulate and, in general, a reasonably comprehensive and lucid understanding of the early 19th century Maritimes. One can only hope that the great God S.S.H.R.C.C. [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada], which giveth but also taketh away at times, will recognize the wisdom of and need, to extend the *D.C.B.* project beyond the present 1900 terminal date. Even those poor benighted 20th century specialists deserve the opportunity to contribute to this monumental and ever more impressive historical project.

W.G. GODFREY

### Parish Perspectives: Recent Work in Community History Within Atlantic Canada

A VISIT TO ANY BOOKSTORE IN Atlantic Canada will soon demonstrate that the "renaissance" of interest in regional history, which has prevailed over the last 20 years, is dominated, at least in volume, by non-academics. The bulk of the material available for purchase has been researched and written by "amateurs", i.e. by those without graduate training in the discipline of history. This abundant literature rarely receives mention in the review section of academic journals, thanks to the belief that, for the most part, it has little to offer to those engaged in rigorous and analytical exploration of Atlantic Canada's past. As a test of the validity of that negative judgment, several recent works by amateur historians, all in the vein of community studies, have been looked at.

Of the ten items examined, about half made reference to the work of university scholars but those regional scholars most often read by amateurs tend to be a few veterans such as MacNutt, Clark and Bolger, rather than the people who currently dominate the discipline. Moreover, monographs are favoured over periodical literature. For example, *Acadiensis*, despite being widely hailed in academic circles as essential reading for students of the region's history, received mention in only two of the books included in this review. The problem is not that the

amateurs refuse to read. In most cases their work is based on extensive examination of the written record. But their research does skimp on historiography, especially that involving the work of today's generation of university scholars.

This neglect is prompted, at least in part, by a divergence of purpose. The amateurs generally do not share the professional's preoccupation with issues and analysis. Their priority is not to solve problems but rather to tell a story. Descriptions and narration are used by these authors to build a positive image of the past, an image designed to rescue community heritage and thereby bolster local identity against the ravages of "progress". Unfortunately emphasis on detail at the expense of design, and an associated reluctance to confront controversial issues, can produce text which deteriorates into bland antiquarian clutter. That is a problem found in certain of the works cited below but the flaw is not so acute as to warrant summary dismissal of this genre of historical inquiry. Instead, it should be seen as a compromised but nevertheless valuable source of insight into Atlantic Canada's historical experience.

Anselme Chiasson's *History and Acadian Traditions of Cheticamp* (St. John's, Breakwater, 1986), first published in 1962 and now translated by Jean Doris LeBlanc, ranks as a pioneering effort by a devoted amateur to build a comprehensive portrait of his home community, described as "the stronghold of Acadian life in Cape Breton" (Introduction, n.p.). From its founding in the 1780s by survivors of the Expulsion, down to the 1930s, when electricity and the establishment of the Cape Breton Highlands National Park spawned major change, Cheticamp developed in relative isolation. The result was the persistence of a rich tradition of language and behaviour which Chiasson recorded over some 35 years. Accordingly, his book is remarkably successful in establishing a sense of place and recreating the cycle of life traditionally experienced by the Cheticantins. Significantly, his text does address the theme of conflict, most notably that which pitted the mass of local fishermen against absentee merchant interests, based first in the Channel Islands and later in Halifax. Antagonism infused every aspect of community life, including superstition, since it was alleged that the "Jerseymen" were sorcerers, whose power derived from the supernatural. The dramatic focus of Chiasson's study is provided by the community's struggle for economic emancipation, led initially by Pierre Fiset, an "eminent" Victorian who combined the roles of priest and entrepreneur and later by the coop movement. Although eventually delivered from the grip of rapacious merchantocracy, Cheticamp continued to face an uncertain future as cultural assimilation eroded its unique identity. Chiasson's study has numerous limitations, notably avoidance of comparative analysis, lack of historical context, undue emphasis on religious affairs and vagueness about the timing and cause of change. Nevertheless, it deserves to be read, partly because it ranks as the best readily available study of a community with an important story to tell. Beyond that, the reader repeatedly comes across references to significant but little understood phenomena, such as collective ownership of real estate by community pioneers, the persistence of

wooden ploughs in local agriculture, the scarcity of flour in the mid-Victorian diet, linkages between the timing of marriage and demands for labour by the fishery, and the use of song-satire as a form of protest among the dispossessed. Chiasson offers little development of these and other themes but that failure is offset by his success in calling our attention to subjects in need for further research. Thus as a pioneering venture in community history, this book must be counted a success.

More recent research into the history of Acadian communities within the region has spawned several books, including those by Roy Bourgeois and Maurice Basque, *Une histoire de Lameque. des origines à nos jours* (Moncton, Les éditions d'Acadie, 1984) and Ronald LaBelle, *Au village du bois: mémoires d'une communauté Acadienne* (Moncton, Université de Moncton, 1985). The former, which the authors acknowledge was based on a single summer of archival and field work, seeks to provide an overview of economic and social development within a fishing outport which, like Cheticamp, belonged to the commercial empire of the Jerseymen. Echoing Chiasson's thesis, Bourgeois and Basque argue that merchant exploitation thrust the Acadians of Lameque into poverty and powerlessness. Throughout the 19th century, village life featured mass illiteracy, periodic famine, endemic tuberculosis, demographic stagnation and chronic neglect by both church and state. In contrast, the early 20th century became for Lameque an era of achievement which climaxed in the 1930s as alien merchantocracy gave way to indigeneous cooperative enterprise. Thus after a century and a half of bondage, self-help began to transform Lameque into "une des communautés les plus dynamique de la province" (p. 110). Less polemical in its approach to the past is the story of the "village of wood" (Memramcook East), as told by LaBelle. Based on oral interviews, complemented by archival research, this book seeks to reconstruct an Acadian community which derived its livelihood from farming and forestry. After an initial chapter by Paul Surette which explores the 18th century origins of post-Expulsion Acadian settlement in New Brunswick's Memramcook valley, the book skips ahead to the early 20th century, an era within recall by those interviewed for this project. Thematic chapters are used to present basic features of rural life, such as work, housing, diet, religion and recreation. Adversity and conflict are alluded to, although the lines of conflict within Memramcook East appear to have been more subtle than in the Acadian Gulf outports. Here what locals are most likely to remember are battles with puritanical clergymen bent on suppressing dancing and their being ridiculed as hillbillies by fellow Acadians.

Strictly speaking, these two works should not be categorized as amateur productions. Both bear the imprint of academic input provided through the Centre for Acadian Studies at the University of Moncton. The results are an example of what can be accomplished through collaboration between amateurs and professionals. That said, readers should appreciate that neither of these two books was designed to be definitive. The study of Lameque establishes a general

framework of community development but offers only preliminary analysis of key sources such as merchant records and parish registers. The identity and role of local notables such as the Sormany family demands further investigation and the genesis of the coop movement must be explored in greater depth. The latter topic should be ideal for application of the techniques of oral history. As for the story of Memramcook East, its truly superb account of the settlement phase of community growth ought to be extended ahead in time. For example, what kind of rural society had emerged here by the mid-Victorian era? Did this community share in what is often described as the region's "Golden Age"? What changes were occurring within this community during the emergence of the so-called Acadian "renaissance"? Until such questions are addressed, readers will be lulled into the impression that time stood still in Memramcook East through most of the 19th century.

The era was anything but static for those Acadians living along the shores of south-western Nova Scotia, as we discover from Paul H. Stehlin's book, *The electric city: the Stehlins of New France* (Hantsport, Lancelot, 1983). Stehlin's grandfather, a textiles manufacturer who had been displaced from his native Alsace by the Franco-Prussian war and later from France by disillusionment with the secularism and decadence of the new Third Republic, brought his family to Digby County in the early 1890s. They were attracted to south-western Nova Scotia, in part by connections with the Eudist fathers who were then in the process of launching College Ste Anne at Church Point. Soon the Stehlins had set up an elaborate sawmilling operation at "New France", ten miles inland from Weymouth. An enterprise endowed with such expressions of modernization as electricity and a railroad, it became a major local employer and agent of economic change, most notably when the Stehlins insisted on cash rather than truck payment for their workers. They also challenged local custom by importing elements of Old World "respectability", including wine on the dinner table, Sunday violin concerts, mid-day siestas in summer and daily shaving. The experiment failed. By World War One, fire, death, emigration and a slumping market for lumber had killed the miniature community of New France. What survived were written records and oral traditions within the Stehlin family which the author has used to provide sketches of timber drives, railroad and steamship travel, Victoria Day celebrations, and Acadian cultural norms as they existed in turn of the century Nova Scotia. Ironically, these migrants, who came to Nova Scotia filled with idealistic expectations, left a record which challenges the notion that rural society was traditionally a place of virtue and harmony.

Academics will fault Stehlin on several points. For example, he provides the reader with no footnotes or bibliography. Moreover, his text has been written in a manner which makes it difficult to tell when the author, rather than his sources, is speaking. As for content, little attempt has been made to comprehend the Canadian business environment within which the Stehlins operated. A further weakness is neglect of possible Stehlin involvement with Acadian nationalism, a

movement which climaxed in 1912, when a friend of the family, Father Edouard LeBlanc, was consecrated Roman Catholic Bishop of Saint John. On balance, however, the author is to be commended for committing 30 years to this project. His book and the source materials gathered for its compilation will prove useful for expanding our understanding of a relatively neglected component of regional history.

Academic rigour features prominently in W.R. MacKinnon Jr.'s *Over the portage: early history of the Upper Miramichi* (Fredericton, New Ireland, 1984). Drawing upon his training as graduate student and archivist, the author presents an impressive analysis of community development in two parishes located at the headwaters of the Miramichi. This is a story of settlement migration, largely by second generation Loyalists, into emerging timber country. Population recruitment, the mobilization of capital and entrepreneurship, and the rise of social institutions on the frontier are discussed. Special emphasis is placed on family dynamics, including marriage patterns and intergenerational transfer of property. As well, MacKinnon considers the factor of persistence within frontier society. One of his major discoveries is that crisis conditions in the timber trade, reinforced by tension arising out of an influx of immigrants from Ireland, prompted a mass emigration of pioneers from the upper Miramichi during the 1840s. Most left for Maine, drawn there by the allure of relative economic prosperity. MacKinnon also challenges popular myth about pioneer life. He emphasizes that risk haunted those on the timber frontier. Achievement might be wiped out overnight by natural disasters such as the great fire of 1825. Equal devastation derived from repeated collapses in British demand for timber. Such an environment produced heroes but also an abundance of gamblers and thieves. Thus organizations such as Doaktown's 1841 "Society for prayer and Religious Conference" reflected not so much consensus as the desperate attempt of a minority to impose discipline on unruly neighbours.

The foregoing austere and frequently bleak portrait of life on the Miramichi stands in sharp contrast to the images found in *All our born days: a lively history of New Brunswick's Kingston Peninsula* (Sackville, Percheron, 1984), written by local resident Doris Calder. She argues that life in this rural parish situated between the Saint John and Kennebecasis river was essentially good. Here Loyalist pioneers created a community which could boast of possessing prosperity, stability and contentment. Calder has evidence to back up her thesis. Blessed with arable land, water power and timber, as well as good transportation facilities and ready access to the Saint John market, Kingston rapidly matured, a process reflected in the early appearance of churches, schools, mills, shops and taverns. Success for this community apparently climaxed during the middle decades of the 19th century, when the Kingston Peninsula became a focal point for shipbuilding amidst the Maritime "Age of Sail". Then came protracted stagnation, featuring the collapse of rural industry and emigration by the young. Unfortunately, Calder's episodic and anecdotal style, combined with reticence

about failure, prevents her from explaining what it meant for Kingston to be subjected to the collapse of its “golden age”. In this account the period after the 1870s is presented in purely nostalgic terms. Dislocation and conflict receive no mention. The narrative focuses instead on such things as ice skating in winter and summer excursions on the river steamers. This image, admirably reinforced by the lyric photography of Freeman Patterson, is appealing but to what extent does it represent more illusion than reality?

A similarity uncritical perspective on the past can be found in *Mud Creek, the story of the town of Wolfville, Nova Scotia* (Wolfville, Wolfville Historical Society, 1985). Edited by James D. Davison, this volume is a collective enterprise, embodying the work of some 24 researcher/authors. Predictably, the book displays structural fragmentation and elements of repetition. Nevertheless, a relatively coherent picture emerges of a community which took shape during the era of mid-19th century regional prosperity and then avoided the main thrust of economic decline thanks to activity derived from apples, industry and Acadia University. By the 1920s Wolfville abounded in expressions of progress, including town status, street lights, concrete sidewalks, a brick high school, library facilities, a municipal band and organized sports. Regrettably, the authors seem reluctant to go beyond this accumulation of institutional and architectural detail to comment on human character and experience in Wolfville, especially that of those without wealth and power. It is a curious omission in a volume which has been formally dedicated to the memory of John Hardwick, town woodcutter and personification of those traditionally “Unreported in...History” (p. viii). Nevertheless, Hardwick and his kind are shuffled aside in favour of the more respectable elements of Wolfville society and even they suffer anonymity. The net effect of these problems is a book lacking in terms of flesh and blood reality.

Somewhat more successful in terms of organization and content is Finley Martin's *A view from the bridge, Montague, P.E.I.* (Montague, Town of Montague, 1984). The opening section of this book addresses the complex issue of how geography and human enterprise combine to spawn urban development. It appears that Montague emerged basically because of its ability to function as a service centre for the neighbouring rural hinterland during a pre-Confederation agricultural boom focused on potato production. Island agriculture experienced hard times after Confederation but Montague weathered the crisis sufficiently well so that by early in the 20th century, it had risen to become the leading urban centre of King's County. This success, Martin implies, derived largely from the village's ability to diversify into manufacturing. Sustained by the income and employment opportunity obtained from locally owned factories, Montague acquired such hallmarks of progress as municipal incorporation, two branch banks, hydroelectricity, a skating rink and a racetrack. This story of achievement would be more enlightening if the author had taken greater care when probing the underlying factors at work in shaping Montague's destiny. For example,

from what sources did the village recruit its labour and capital? Who were the leading local entrepreneurs and to what extent do they deserve to be identified as the chief architects of community development? Why did economic success increasingly elude this community after World War One? Answers to such questions are needed before we can truly understand historical forces that gave rise to "Montague the beautiful".

No one reading *Corner Brook, a social history of a paper town* (St. John's, Breakwater, 1986) by Harold Horwood can be in doubt about the logic of urbanization in Newfoundland's lower Humber valley, early in the 20th century. There, foreign owned corporations, first a railroad and later a manufacturer of pulp and paper, intervened to transform an outpost into a minor metropolis. The process began late in the 1890s and reached a dramatic crescendo during the 1920s. Horwood is at his best when describing the tumult spawned as Newfoundland Pulp and Paper embarked on construction of a mill and townsite. Their goal was an integration of workplace and residence so as to give company management the power to impose authoritarian regulation on all aspects of community life. Paradoxically, Corner Brook's appeal, as an island of opportunity within a sea of rural distress, spawned growth on such a scale that settlement spread beyond the corporate townsite, creating a working class suburb renowned for its lack of "social control". The bizarre personality of this overnight urban creation is explored in no more than summary fashion by the author. His allusions to class and cultural divergence suggest, however, that Corner Brook warrants further investigation. Among the things we need to know more about is the fate of rural people suddenly introduced to both an urban lifestyle and the discipline of factory labour. Some, as Horwood notes, quickly succumbed to such disasters as typhoid. But for the survivors what, beyond discovery of the delights of baseball, did they derive from becoming city dwellers?

Corner Brook's emergence during the interwar decades coincided with the growing up of Aubrey Tizzard, whose memoirs appear in *On sloping ground, reminiscences of outpost life in Notre Dame Bay, Newfoundland* (St. John's, Breakwater, 1984). Born in 1919, Tizzard looks back on the 1920s and 1930s, seeking to reconstruct daily life in an east coast Newfoundland outpost. The result is a book which will appeal more to folklorist than to historians. While he comments on outpost dialect and the practice of "mumming", Tizzard makes virtually no mention of matters relating to social, economic or political change. For example, from reading this text, one would never know of the disasters that overtook Newfoundland during the Great Depression. Horwood's image of starving fishermen, begging in the streets of Corner Brook, receives no elaboration in Tizzard's work. This oversight may simply reflect the naivety of youth or it could be that the Tizzard household, cushioned by income from a small store and post office operation, avoided the worst effects of hard times.

Overall, this examination of a part of the history currently being written by non-academics both confirms and denies the conventional wisdom which



prevails within the professariat about what is being done beyond their own ranks. The work of the amateurs is often seriously flawed by lack of discipline and depth in terms of research, organization and analysis. Oversimplification, elitism, an avoidance of controversy and, above all, parochialism, undermine the quality of this literature. On the other hand, university scholars, whose own work often falls short of perfection, should know that the amateurs are not merely regurgitating the obvious or engaging in trivial pursuit. Their publications repeatedly call attention to vital aspects of our past which, till now, have suffered serious neglect. Once this positive element in the work of non-academics is acknowledged, we face questions about how best to promote collaboration between amateur and professional historians. The rewards that this would generate are demonstrated by certain of the books here discussed. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that an enhancement of cooperation will develop spontaneously. But rather than despair, perhaps we can urge the archivists of Atlantic Canada to play the role of catalyst for action which will narrow the gap existing among those exploring the region's past.

DAVID SUTHERLAND

### People of Myth, People of History: A Look at Recent Writings on the Metis

THE YEARS BRACKETING THE CENTENARY OF Batoche and the death of Louis Riel saw the blossoming of a small publishing industry commemorating the events of 1885. Most of the commercial and scholarly presses in Canada, particularly in the West, fielded one or more volumes to mark the occasion. This essay undertakes to sample the feast, to comment on its highly varied fare (from gourmet quality to in some instances half-baked or warmed-over), and to explore some of the issues that these many offerings raise. It is impossible to be exhaustive; the items mentioned are a selection, chosen because of their wide circulation or their importance, and their subjective interest to this particular writer.

Anyone confronting the rapidly expanding literature on the Metis faces some complex questions of identity and definition. On a national level, the Metis have at last been granted legal existence (although not definition) by Canada's constitution (1982), which identified Indians, Inuit, and Metis as the aboriginal peoples of Canada. The term, however, has been applied in countless different ways, ranging from highly specific to broadly inclusive, since it first attained wide usage as an ethnic category in the early 1800s. The literature continues to reflect that variability, although "Metis" is increasingly generalized in popular writing to all people identifiably of mixed Indian-European descent, sometimes