

Some Participants Missing But A Great Deal Present

W. G. Godfrey

Volume 20, Number 1, Autumn 1990

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad20_1re05

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Godfrey, W. G. (1990). Some Participants Missing But A Great Deal Present. *Acadiensis*, 20(1), 249–253.

ment and the private sector which have profoundly influenced the modern Canadian polity. The various mechanisms by which the Canadian population has been inculcated in technological and scientific ideas are as well as yet just partially understood, as is the degree to which 19th and 20th century Canadian culture has been dominated by an ideology of practicality. There is much to be done, and it should be very rewarding.

DON MACLEOD

Some Participants Missing But A Great Deal Present

VOLUME VII OF THE *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1988) examines the lives of prominent British North Americans, or individuals who had a significant impact upon British North America, whose year of death falls in or between 1836 and 1850. In certain cases careers peaked sometime before dates of death, or dates of death occurred sometime after the time period covered, and so this volume actually offers much more and much less than events occurring and individuals active in the 1830s and 1840s. From a national perspective, the North and West of what would eventually be the Canadian nation are more in evidence than in Volumes I to VI while Upper and Lower Canada clearly have taken centre stage. Nonetheless Atlantic Canadian history continues to be reasonably well served by the *D.C.B.* If the entries dealing with this part of Canada are isolated for special consideration they do provide revealing insights concerning political, economic and social development, or non-development. Indeed, reading together the New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland contributions allows some interesting comparisons.

As can be expected, an examination of prominent and significant individuals within developing colonial societies will not do justice to the inarticulate whether in an ethnic, class or gender sense. In addition, despite a commendable attempt to include artists, writers, educators, and an appreciation of cultural development in general, at this time the focus within the colonies was largely on other more basic matters. To be sure, an excellent taste of the "intellectual awakening" within Nova Scotia is provided in the biographies of John Young (pp. 930-5) and Thomas McCulloch (pp. 529-41). The plight of the artistically inclined is revealed in William Valentine's activities. While described as the "most important portrait painter in early 19th-century Nova Scotia" he apparently reverted to house painting when business was slack (pp. 875-6). The difficulties of those on the margins of society are exemplified by the Indians and those interested in their

predicament. While the last of the Newfoundland Beothuks disappeared in an earlier volume, Micmacs and other native peoples, due largely to the work of the late Leslie Upton, are not so easily dispatched. Through entries such as those on Noel John and Andrew Meuse (pp. 443-4 and 608-10), a sad picture emerges in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia of shrinking reservations, hardship and deprivation, and attempts to underline mistreatment and neglect for the benefit of both colonial and mother-country representatives. On equally oppressive Prince Edward Island the Micmac cause became a 20-year crusade for Thomas Irwin (pp. 436-8), but it was a campaign of “unrelieved failure” since he seemed the “only white person...to demonstrate any sympathy for the Indians”.

Throughout Atlantic Canada religious divisions, and ethnic divisions within denominations, continued to be a reality. Dissenting denominations grew while the established church was virtually disestablished. In New Brunswick David Burpee’s (pp. 120-1) biography suggests that dissenting religious beliefs sometimes tied in with the support of political dissenters such as Samuel Denny Street. Antoine Gagnon (pp. 332-3) was left “touchy” and “distrustful” after being bypassed for the bishop’s appointment in 1842 when the diocese of New Brunswick was created and Irish Catholic William Dollard was appointed. The Irish Catholic hierarchical domination began at this point and the resultant Acadian-Irish rivalry for dominance within the Roman Catholic church would only be resolved in the 20th century. Likewise in Newfoundland Michael Anthony Fleming articulated an assertive Irish Roman Catholicism as he sought his priests in Ireland, avoided sending potential candidates for the priesthood to Lower Canada, and refused to accept native Newfoundlanders as candidates. The result was a local church with “a strong Irish cast” but also the emergence of an opposition faction of laity and clergy within the Catholic church, castigated by Fleming as “liberals” (pp. 292-300). It was a period marked by a legacy of division along religious lines in the broader Newfoundland political arena to which Fleming made his own contribution. On Prince Edward Island John Small Macdonald’s success (pp. 541-2) as a moderate proprietor turned politician, despite the Escheat party’s 1838 victory, provides an interesting example of how ethno-religious leanings prevailed even when the crucial and divisive land issue was discussed. In Nova Scotia, the once solidly established Anglican church fell upon difficult times as the second generation loyalist, John Inglis, fought a determined but fruitless rearguard action in defence of Anglican privilege (pp. 432-6). By the time of his death, disestablishment and “a church much diminished in its official status and social influence” were realities that had to be accepted.

It was an age of liberal reform but the controlled and limited nature of the reform impulse contrasts more sharply than ever with the violent revolutionary course attempted in Upper and Lower Canada. Moreover it is in the political figures of this volume that the major structural weakness, or inconvenience, of the *D.C.B.* surfaces. Because this volume deals with those who died in the 1836-1850 period, the complete story is found only by reference to volumes

which were published before or come after Volume VII. Thus critical characters are off-stage at the crucial moment: in Lower Canada Sir Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine has been covered in Volume IX while Louis-Joseph Papineau appeared in Volume X; in Upper Canada Robert Baldwin and William Lyon Mackenzie are in Volumes VIII and IX respectively. Distressing longevity besets Maritime politicians as well since New Brunswick's Charles Simonds appeared in Volume VIII, Prince Edward Island's William Cooper and George Coles in Volumes IX and X respectively, and Nova Scotia's Joseph Howe in Volume X. Only Newfoundland's major reformers, for the most part, had the courtesy to follow the *D.C.B.* guidelines and perish at the proper moment. This could be considered merely an inconvenience rather than a fundamental deficiency now that the complementary volumes are completed and available but it does present problems to the reviewer. On the basis of this volume, for example, the lieutenant governors appear to be a distressingly poor crop. While Sir Martin Hunter's term as acting governor emerges as a pleasant and harmonious interlude in New Brunswick history (pp. 428-30), Robert Ainslie's sojourn in Cape Breton witnessed his characterization of his Island subjects as "the refuse of the 3 Kingdoms" and his pleasure at the re-annexation of his colony to mainland Nova Scotia (pp. 9-11). Sir Archibald Campbell (pp. 139-42) is confirmed as a governor totally out of sympathy with the inhabitants of New Brunswick. Sir Colin Campbell is "the author of his own unpopularity" in Nova Scotia (pp. 142-5). In Newfoundland Sir Charles Hamilton, "the last of the admiral-governors even though a resident, did little to redeem the reputation of that office" (pp. 376-7). This last sweep through New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland is executed by the same contributor who in another *D.C.B.* volume set a lofty standard of judgment when he wrote about Sir John Harvey who, with considerable success, served terms from 1836 to 1852 as lieutenant-governor in all four Atlantic Canadian colonies. Once this key contribution is re-read,¹ this "Pearl of Civil Governors", as Lord Sydenham described him, does indeed provide a worthwhile and demanding standard that few lieutenant-governors were able to emulate.

Turning to the champions of the reform cause, the absence of key participants makes the story rather incomplete, but the biographies presented do indicate the slow pace and limited extent of political change. In New Brunswick William Franklin Odell, faithful member of the old loyalist elite, now reluctantly served "liberal" governors whose views were "repugnant" to him (pp. 657-9). Although Richard Simonds's emergence as speaker of the assembly in 1828 was significant, in

1 Phillip Buckner, "Sir John Harvey", in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto, 1985), VIII, pp. 374-84.

that he was “from outside the circle of loyalist office holders”, his own financial success linked him firmly to the dominant social elite (pp. 806-8). In Nova Scotia this was the era of Joseph Howe whose achievements chronicled in another volume render Jotham Blanchard (pp. 881-5) a figure who did not make much of a mark but who did at least open “Howe’s eyes to the magnitude of the province’s political ills”. Successful businessmen such as Thomas Forrester lent their support to Howe and slowly Halifax would be transformed from a “merchantocracy” to a “shopocracy” (pp. 307-9). In Saint John the wealthy Hugh Johnston (pp. 444-5) also supported reform. His biography provides an excellent examination of the transformation of his “portfolio” from mercantile investments to mortgages and notes, to land, and eventually to bank stocks and municipal bonds. With the land question perennially unresolved, Prince Edward Island’s politics and economy remained tightly linked. The entry on George Wright (pp. 924-5) reveals the continuing close connection of Island officialdom with proprietorial and business interests, but Fade Goff’s activities (pp. 351-2) revise the revisionists. Some of the landowners have recently been dealt with more gently while land agents and middlemen have been treated more harshly. Goff however is portrayed as an agent/middleman who did not oppress the tenantry or embezzle “absent employers”.

In Newfoundland this was the heyday of reformers such as William Carson and Patrick Morris and their entries, along with others, vividly capture the advances and setbacks that mark the tumultuous politics of the period. Carson’s career (pp. 151-6) is particularly well done since his talents as an agitator, propagandist and legislator are carefully delineated but there is no concealment of his partisanship and hypocrisy. His conduct in the 1837-39 period, it is argued, diminished the reputation of the assembly, brought “representative government into disrepute and paved the way for the Amalgamated Legislature”. The wisdom of the *D.C.B.*’s willingness sometimes to assign several related key figures to the same contributor, a professor of English in this case, is borne out by the same writer’s handling of Peter Brown (pp. 112-4). While a reformer supporting Carson for the most part, Brown feared the “preponderating influence” of St. John’s and was an advocate of “out harbour interests”. The conflicting out-port versus capital city forces within the reform movement are convincingly presented so that Carson and Morris emerge as “St. John’s politicians, rather than as bearers of the torch of reform for the whole island”. When Patrick Morris’s contributions are enumerated his biographer also adroitly balances the presentation (pp. 626-34). Morris was a successful merchant who “developed and maintained a strong sense of social class” and, while championing the poor and disadvantaged, he “was much more concerned with the political advancement of the Catholic middle class”. A broadening and reshaping of the political elite was clearly underway but this was a transformation that protected and enhanced the rights and privileges of only those at certain, more elevated, levels of society. In another *D.C.B.* volume, a dissection has been offered of the conflict

on Prince Edward Island between a ruling old elite and an aspiring new elite² and evidence concerning variations of this struggle or adaptation are now available for all the British North American colonies.

The last pieces in the pre-confederation puzzle fall into place with the completion of this volume but it remains to be seen whether this treasure-trove of insight and information will be fully employed by scholars. Already there are encouraging signs that this massive biographical project is having a substantial impact on recent historical writing as new studies appear revealing a heavy reliance upon or frequent citation of the *D.C.B.*³ The best measure of the success of Frances Halpenny and the dedicated editorial team will be the entry of *D.C.B.* articles into the historical mainstream, and their acceptance as complete, concise and often penetrating analyses which must be consulted and accommodated. Editorial leadership has now passed to Ramsay Cook which provides reassurance that the outstanding standards set and contributions made thus far may be matched by the volumes that will deal with the period from 1890 onward.

W.G. GODFREY

- 2 See W.G. Godfrey, "Some Thoughts on the *D.C.B.* and Maritime Historiography", *Acadiensis*, VII, 2 (Spring 1978), pp. 112-3.
- 3 To cite only a few examples, see J.K. Johnson, *Becoming Prominent: Regional Leadership in Upper Canada, 1791-1841* (Kingston and Montreal, 1989); J.M. Bumsted, *Land, Settlement and Politics on Eighteenth-Century Prince Edward Island* (Kingston and Montreal, 1987); Dale Miquelon, *New France 1701-1744: "A Supplement to Europe"* (Toronto, 1987).

The Health of Medical History

IN 1982, I WROTE A REVIEW essay in this journal on recent publications in the history of medicine pointing out the differences in approach between practitioner/historians and academic historians. The former wrote out of a Whiggish inclination whereas the latter were influenced by the social control orientation so prominent at the time. The books reviewed here reveal that the belief in progress still underlines much of the medical history written by those who participated in it. The social control trend, however, is almost completely missing from these works. This has not meant a coming together of the practitioner/historians and the academic historians. The questions each asks of the material remain different; the former focuses predominantly on the what and when, whereas the latter are more concerned with the why and how of the past. But these two groups are not the only ones involved in the writing of medical history. The books reviewed here were written by historians, medical practitioners, a sociologist, free lance writers and a participant in the actual topic under study. This could reveal a vitality and