

Going Public: Atlantic Canadian Academics and Popular History

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REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

Going Public: Atlantic Canadian Academics and Popular History

COINCIDING WITH CANADA DAY 2001, the anachronistically-named Dominion Institute published the results of a poll which purported to indicate that Canadians were “dumb” because they knew fewer “facts” about their national past than did Americans. Ignoring the “fact” that Canada has never enjoyed an agreed-upon national history, the Institute and its supporters criticized the lack of mandatory history courses in provincial high school curricula and the obsessive focus of academics on social, regional and other forms of “new” history. According to *The Globe and Mail*, students are subjected to “the story of ordinary people” to the detriment of “the story of great individuals and great events”. Government-sponsored multiculturalism apparently has “played down the country’s roots and let part of our heritage slip away”. A national, “fact-based” history focusing on political development supposedly would restore a sense of national purpose. Typically, *The Globe and Mail* in following up the story interviewed an entertainment celebrity and a high school teacher and published commentaries by a journalist and a writer of popular history. No academic historian was featured in the coverage.¹

The gulf between academic and “popular” historical writing and distribution is in fact a reality and not just an invention of the Dominion Institute. In the world of media, advocacy groups and commercial publishing, Canadian history appears to be too important to be left to Canadian historians. Academic historians have contributed only a minority of the articles in the general Canadian history magazine, *The Beaver*, and two recent popular histories of Nova Scotia were penned by a writer of fiction and poetry and by a veteran journalist.² The “Great Canadian Questions” section on the Dominion Institute’s web site contains several brief essays on the purposes of history. Only one is written by a (retired) university academic who specializes in Canadian history.³

1 *The Globe and Mail*, 30 June, 2 July 2001. The contributors were Rex Murphy and Christopher Moore. See also Doug Owram, “Narrow Circles: the Historiography of Recent Canadian History”, *National History*, 1, 1 (Winter 1997), pp. 11-18.

2 Lesley Choyce, *Nova Scotia Shaped by the Sea: A Living History* (Toronto, 1996) and Harry Bruce, *An Illustrated History of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1997). When Choyce’s book was released, media coverage noted that the publisher, Viking, had purposely gone out of its way to find an author who was not an academic historian – a strange tribute to 30 years of Maritime historiography.

3 The Dominion Institute was founded in 1997 with a mission “to ensure that all Canadians have the historical and civic knowledge they need to participate in society as active and informed citizens”: <http://www.schoolnet.ca/greatquestions.ca>. The contributors to the “Great Canadian Questions” include Neil Bissoondath, Allan Gotlieb, Michael Ignatieff, Bob Rae, Peter C. Newman and Jack Granatstein, with Granatstein and Ignatieff “squaring off” on the question, “Does History Matter?” The Dominion Institute’s Advisory Board includes a mix of historians, members of the media, newspaper editors and representatives from sponsor corporations which include: Michael Bliss, Richard Gwyn, Roger D. Landry, Ann Medina, Mel Hurtig and Phyllis Yaffe. There appear to be no Atlantic Canadians involved in either project.

The culture and bureaucracy of academic training, hiring, promotion and tenure and the structure of academic publishing admittedly make it difficult for academic writing, no matter its relevance, to find its way into the hands of the general reader. This problem goes beyond the alleged fragmentation of historiography. “Limited identities” may be one theme in Atlantic regional historiography; another is “limited audience”. A visit to a book store will reveal a proliferation of local and specialized histories, political biographies, memoirs and other historical works by journalists, academics who are not trained historians, amateur historians and genealogists. When everyone is an “historian”, retailers do not stock up on many academic tomes. Academic journals are not readily accessible to the general public, and their articles are vetted by a handful of specialists in a given subject. The criterion for publication subventions is a manuscript’s contribution to scholarship, not its readability or sales potential.

Fortunately for all sides in the debate on the state of Canadian history, six Atlantic Canadian historians have produced works that attempt to bridge the divide between academic and popular writing: Margaret Conrad and James Hiller, *Atlantic Canada: A Region in the Making* (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 2001); Edward MacDonald, *If You’re Strong Hearted: Prince Edward Island in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, 2000) and Judith Fingard, Janet Guildford and David Sutherland, *Halifax: The First 250 Years* (Halifax, Formac Publishing, 2000).

On one level, *Atlantic Canada*, part of a new series by Oxford University Press, “The Illustrated History of Canada”, does not meet the criteria of “popular” history. It is actually a superlative synthesis that is an ideal text for university courses in Maritime and/or Atlantic Canadian history. Yet Conrad and Hiller’s effective and concise organization and writing (the text covers several hundred years in little more than 200 pages) and their use of maps and illustrations, including handsome colour plates, combine the best of both worlds. General readers, tourists and those who are new to Atlantic Canada studies will benefit from this volume. Although historiographic debates are introduced throughout its chapters, there is little academic jargon and the narrative flow is one that other writers of other texts would do well to emulate.

Despite the book’s title, the authors admit that the idea of a cohesive region, which emerged tentatively following Newfoundland’s admission to Confederation in 1949, is problematic (pp. 2, 11). Despite Newfoundland and Labrador’s distinct development and sense of history, they are not the subject of separate chapters, as in the standard work on post-1867 Atlantic Canada, but included in the general narrative.⁴ Unlike the editors of the more detailed, standard works on the region, Hiller and Conrad devote roughly two-thirds of their discussion to the pre-1867 decades.

The authors introduce the contrasting traditional view of the “region” as provincial, backward and conservative and the revisionist interpretations (pp. 9-11) but for the most part avoid taking sides, at least until the final chapter. There they express

4 E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Fredericton and Toronto, 1993). The authors in the companion pre-Confederation anthology, Phillip Buckner and John G. Reid, eds., *The Atlantic Region to Confederation: A History* (Fredericton and Toronto, 1994) worked Newfoundland into the overall project. For Hiller’s thoughts on the relationship of Newfoundland to Maritime Provinces history, see James K. Hiller, “Is Atlantic Canada History Possible?”, *Acadiensis*, XXX, 1 (Autumn 2000), pp. 16-22.

concerns over the economic and political developments of the 1980s and 1990s. Free trade, a smaller role for government, market-based solutions and increased corporate power, they suggest, are all detrimental for an economically-dependent region. In this sense the book reflects the abiding political and economic concerns of a generation of regional historians that has dominated graduate teaching and the journal *Acadiensis*.

Atlantic Canada is part of a series that attempts to integrate Canada's growing body of social history, a key feature of regional historiography since the 1970s. First Nations, women and children, migration, ethnic and racial minorities, workers, urban and rural society, reform movements and culture are among the many "new" history themes addressed. Yet the narrative is driven by broad economic and political themes, which is precisely why, in contrast to a number of national Canadian history texts, this work seems so well organized.

It is not fair to praise a book for brevity on the one hand and then point out omissions on the other. But in a text this size, certain themes are glossed over and sources of information are not always found in the bibliography. The post-deportation Acadians, for example, probably deserve more attention. With chronology compressed, a number of passages are potentially misleading due to lack of detail and context. Readers are told of a Fenian "invasion" in 1866, and that Nova Scotia prohibition ended in 1929 (the correct date being 1930). Describing Cape Breton labour leader J.B. McLachlan as "legendary" (p. 168) is a bit much, as is the inclusion of not-quite dead poets and writers as cultural "greats". But these are minor quibbles. This reviewer looks forward to using *Atlantic Canada* in undergraduate classes.

If You're Strong Hearted, whose title is derived from a poem by Prince Edward Island's Milton Acorn, is written by Edward MacDonald, now a member of the history department at the University of Prince Edward Island. Published by the Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation as a millennium project, this is one of the most ambitious works on Atlantic Canadian history to appear in many years. The idea of a history of 20th-century Prince Edward Island originated with a committee of Island entrepreneurs who raised the necessary funds for the project. MacDonald faced a decided lack of academic books and articles on this under-researched topic. Island history has not seeped into the Atlantic Canadian mainstream to the extent it should and contains many gaps (a number of which the author points out). One useful source was *The Island Magazine*, a non-peer-reviewed journal the author edited for a number of years. Another challenge was the "Island way of life", a cultural construct of amazing power that has infiltrated even the halls of academe, creating an often nostalgic, consensus form of history based on the tension between "us" (Prince Edward Islanders) and "them" (the rest of North America).

MacDonald has produced a book of ten chapters and many illustrations that runs close to 400 pages. Although there are no endnotes, there is a useful "sources and further reading" section. The manuscript was not subjected to peer review, which is perhaps fortuitous, because it would be difficult to find two or three academics with a grasp of the topic.⁵ Yet the author has produced an instant classic which combines

5 The role of Michael Bliss as the volume's advisory editor is somewhat ironic, given Bliss's expressed concerns that "limited identities" have undermined national history. See Bliss, "Privatizing the Mind: the Sundering of Canada, the Sundering of Canadian History", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 26, 4 (Winter 1991-92), pp. 5-17. Bliss also is associated with the Dominion Institute.

lucid writing and analysis with detailed local knowledge and a fine grasp of the major developments in 20th-century society. MacDonald's command of the sources is obvious, and the narrative (including photo captions) is enlivened with liberal doses of humour that do not detract from the more serious parts. True to the dust jacket blurb, this book is "hard to put down".

MacDonald breaks the story of Island development into four distinct periods, 1900-19, 1919-45, 1945-69 and 1969 to the present. The chapter organization, and the frequent discussion of provincial and federal politics and economic policies, will appeal to readers who prefer the "big picture". The year 1969 is significant because it marks the beginning of the controversial Comprehensive Development Plan, an attempt by federal and provincial officials to modernize Island society in order to bolster the staple economy. The questions of development and social change are at the heart of the story, whose underlying theme is the extent to which the province conformed to, and resisted, continental trends of modernization following 1900.

The introduction identifies classic themes in modern Island history and political culture: fiscal dependence on Ottawa, concerns over taxation, unemployment and outmigration, local pride, attachment to rural living and debates over the pros and cons of a fixed transportation link to the mainland. In contrast to the "politics of identity" debates surrounding the fixed link proposal in the late 1980s, the turn-of-the-century movement for a tunnel under Northumberland Strait had been universally supported. Another issue is sensitivity towards the mythical family farm: in 1982 legislation limited individual land holding to 1,000 acres (pp. 350-51) although less than a sixth of the rural population farmed (p. 326).

With little immigration between the mid-19th and late 20th centuries, Prince Edward Island has one of the Canada's more homogeneous and densely-settled populations, and many of its ethnic Acadians are unilingual English speakers. It is the "second most Catholic province in Canada" (p. 18), which made Protestant-Catholic relations, until the late 20th century, an important reality in political and social life. Agriculture and the fisheries dominated the economy and politics for much of the 20th century, industrial class conflict was minimal and the impact of social democracy almost nil. The author provides a strong discussion of developments in agriculture, Prince Edward Island's chief industry, and details how technology such as hard-surfaced roads, electricity and new ferries altered Island life. As a new generation of historians has been recognizing, tourism became not only a major driver in the provincial economy, but also a category for cultural representation, with the Island marketed as the "Cradle of Confederation", the home of Anne of Green Gables and a pastoral playground of beaches and golf courses.

Criticisms of this fine project are few. Although social history and the experience of women were well covered, the controversial issue of abortion rights was not included. In this area of social policy, Prince Edward Island indeed is distinct from the rest of Canada. And the Island did not "stand alone" (p. 144) when the United States repealed national prohibition in 1933. Kansas, like Prince Edward Island, retained prohibition until 1948.⁶

Halifax: The First 250 Years is an engaging and accessible study that meets three

6 Robert Smith Bader, *Prohibition in Kansas: A History* (Lawrence, 1986).

criteria in the general book market: brevity (less than 190 pages of text and only one page of notes), price and illustrations. Fingard, Guildford and Sutherland have drawn on not only the work of others but also their own considerable body of research. The text is footnoted but the publishers have neglected to include a bibliography, a disturbing trend in illustrated histories. Aside from a few references to neighbouring Dartmouth, the various suburbs and outlying communities receive little attention. The focus is on peninsular Halifax, founded as a British naval and military counterweight to the French at Louisbourg. The challenge for the authors was to counter the standard view of Halifax's history, summarized in Thomas Raddall's 1949 classic *Halifax: Warden of the North*. This older, popular interpretation rests on Halifax's historic role as an imperial, then Canadian, naval and military base, and its supposed attachment to conservatism and tradition. Drawing on labour, social and women's history, the authors explore Halifax's "hunger for innovation, a willingness to engage in protest, and a talent for creative reconstruction" (p. 7).

There is little discussion of the early aboriginal presence in Chebucto; the narrative begins in 1749. Given the argument that the British settlement of Chebucto Harbour under Edward Cornwallis was an act of "arrogance" (p. 13), the importance of the area to the 18th-century Mi'kmaq bears some discussion. David Sutherland, who has published on the business, social and political history of Halifax, covers the period up to municipal incorporation. Judith Fingard, whose work on social, labour and criminal justice history is well known, handles the years 1841 to the First World War. Janet Guildford, an expert on women's and social history, was responsible for the remaining chapters. Although there is a useful introduction which appears to have been written by a fourth person, the book ends suddenly, with no real summary or review of major themes.

The founding of Halifax is discussed as an exercise in imperial realpolitik, and Mi'kmaq attacks on the British are considered a form of diplomacy. Despite the author's intentions, the chapters on early Halifax, which include the American Revolution, war with France beginning in 1793 and the War of 1812 as well as personages such as Joshua Mauger, Jonathan Belcher, John Wentworth, Edward Duke of Kent and Richard Uniacke, do not stray far from earlier accounts. The first section also pays attention to Halifax's black community, which was formed from three distinct waves of newcomers. By the early 1840s the city's middle class stressed "devotion to work, family and community stewardship" (p. 66).

The middle section, covering industrialization, expansion of the port, improvements in urban infrastructure and institutionalization (which included racially-segregated schools by the 1870s), is strong on social history and weak on political issues such as Confederation. Railway and port development, according to Fingard, gave Halifax "too many vested interests in the Canadian connection" to seriously contest the results of Confederation (p. 97). The early 20th-century reform movement, which included prohibition, was largely spearheaded by women from prominent families. The Halifax explosion of 1917 and its aftermath receive several pages. The coverage of the interwar years reflects a spotty secondary literature on labour and social themes, with some attention to port development and popular culture. The discussion on the Second World War revises the earlier Raddall version by explaining Ottawa's detrimental industrial policies, but also repeats much of the earlier story.

The chapters covering the period 1945 to 1999 are the most challenging, for there is little supporting secondary literature. Much of Halifax's post-war economic promotion and infrastructure development, including controversial urban renewal projects such as the destruction of the black community of Africville, was rooted in the experiences of the 1940s and 1950s. The expansion and alleged retraction of the state, and the impact on the city, is a dominant theme in the final chapters. It would be useful to have hard numbers on the scale of provincial and federal salaries and other expenditures as they affected Halifax, whose housing prices and family income now approach the Canadian average in a have-not region. The origins of modern Haligonians could also provide a useful statistical table, as since the 1960s, Halifax has benefited from a phenomenon noted by MacDonald for Prince Edward Island: immigration of educated, skilled and white collar workers to staff the welfare state and corporate world. In a region with nodes of relatively prosperous, unionized public sector workers (Fredericton, Moncton and Charlottetown being other examples), Halifax is the biggest node of all. As Hiller and Conrad suggest, it has become the metropolis not only of Nova Scotia, but of four provinces (p. 212). Despite the importance in Canadian urban history of metropolis-hinterland issues, *Halifax: The First 250 Years* sidesteps the ambivalent relationship of the capital city to the rest of Nova Scotia.

Atlantic Canadian history remains a fragmented enterprise. The world of Newfoundland and Labrador historiography is not that of the Maritime Provinces, and within the latter, Nova Scotia topics continue to dominate. Spokespersons for the First Nations and black communities continue to object that their history is either ignored or subjected to tokenism. The anglophone historians who have dominated regional historiography for three decades have few connections with their francophone counterparts who work on Acadian society.⁷ The gap between academic and popular history, which is not always the fault of the former, is in no danger of closing. But the above examples raise hope that commercial publishers will take more chances with academic historians, and that the academic hiring, promotion, research funding and publications processes will take a broader view of scholarship, one that includes not only "popular" monographs but also media work such as print, radio, video, web sites and CD-ROMs.

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⁷ The gap between Maritime and Acadian historiography is discussed by P.D. Clarke in "L'Acadie perdue; Or, Maritime History's Other", *Acadiensis*, XXX, 1 (Autumn 2000), pp. 73-91.