

Introduction to the Roundtable on Re-Imagining Regions

Margaret Conrad

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IN 1978 THE ATLANTIC CANADA AND WESTERN CANADIAN STUDIES conferences met jointly in Fredericton and Calgary “to study the identities and characteristics of these two hinterlands”, and a selection of fine papers from these meetings, edited by Phillip Buckner and David Bercuson, was published in 1981 under the title *Eastern and Western Perspectives*.¹ This collaboration was never repeated. By the time that eastern and western scholars met again in 1991, under the auspices of the Gorsebrook Institute and the Plains Research Institute, to discuss regional perspectives on constitutional issues,² the Western Studies Conference, which began meeting annually in 1969, had dissolved. Comparative regional studies tend now to be the preserve of institutes and think tanks, most of them headed by economists and political scientists. Because of these developments, it seemed to the organizers of the 2005 Atlantic Canada Studies Conference that a *historical* reflection on the relevance of region in Atlantic and Western Canada was long overdue.

The session was planned as a roundtable and the five speakers who presented or sent papers – Sean Cadigan’s flight from St. John’s was cancelled due to fog – sparked a lively discussion. The contribution by geographer Randy Widdis proved especially valuable as a western counterpoint to my brief survey on the changing notions of regionalism in Canada. Sean Cadigan, a historian of Newfoundland and Labrador, and Bill Waiser, whose centennial history of Saskatchewan was spinning off the presses while he was in Fredericton,³ called into question the relevance of region, foregrounding instead provincial (Waiser) and class (Cadigan) identities. Jean Barman, author of an award-winning history of British Columbia,⁴ ranged comfortably from the Pacific to the Atlantic. Her well-documented reminder of the shifting human impact on regional identities in Canada underscored the significance of history as a vehicle for understanding geopolitical developments.

One of the most obvious differences between the papers presented in 1978 and 2005 is the ambiguity about the very notion of region. Since 1978 even those most identified with regional scholarship relating to Atlantic Canada, such as Ian McKay and James K. Hiller, have begun to reflect on the limits of regionalism as a scholarly device.⁵ Hiller concluded, after looking closely at the articles published in *Acadiensis* and the theses produced by the Atlantic Canada Studies programme at Saint Mary’s

1 David J. Bercuson and Phillip A. Buckner, eds., *Eastern and Western Perspectives* (Toronto, 1981), p. i.

2 James N. McCrorie and Martha L. MacDonald, eds., *The Constitutional Future of the Prairie and Atlantic Regions of Canada* (Regina, 1992).

3 W.A. Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History* (Calgary, 2005).

4 Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto, 1991).

5 James K. Hiller, “Is Atlantic Canadian History Possible?” *Acadiensis*, XXX, 1 (Autumn, 2000), pp. 16-22; Ian McKay, “A Note on ‘Region’ in Writing the History of Atlantic Canada”, *Acadiensis*, XXIX, 2 (Spring 2000), pp. 89-101.

University, that the whole was less than its parts. His analysis of the general scholarly output on Atlantic Canada published in the *Acadiensis* bibliographies since 1975 yielded only 7 books, 16 articles and 26 essay collections that purported to cover the region as a whole. In a similar vein, McKay has noted the “sheer difficulty” of articulating “region” as a concept and “Atlantic Canada” as an application of that concept, with the result that they were “easy subjects for ‘deconstruction’ even before that term was invented”.⁶ In this regard, of course, “region” is not alone. The postmodern approach to scholarship has called all categories into question, including ones once thought immutable, such as gender and race. If anything, this hyper-scepticism enriches rather than undermines regional studies, adding new complexities to what once seemed so obvious that it was taken for granted.

Scepticism may be a useful heuristic device, but it serves us less well when we wish to bring valued institutions and concepts successfully through periods of great change. At the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference held in St. John’s in 2003, there was a feeling in some circles that the time had come to follow the Atlantic Association of Historians into oblivion. Is the survival of the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, which has met roughly every two years since its inception in 1974, simply another manifestation of the region’s unwillingness to relinquish outdated traditions? I think not. If the 2005 conference is any indication, Atlantic Canada Studies is flourishing. Especially striking is the fact that nearly half of the more than 50 papers presented in 18 sessions dealt with topics on the post-1945 period of the region’s history and that over a quarter of our presenters were graduate students, ready to carry on from the generation of the 1970s that laid the foundation for Atlantic Canada Studies. While it is true that Jim Hiller’s call for a comparative and collaborative enterprise to succeed the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project has yet to materialize, the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference itself serves as a key venue for comparison and collaboration. Its demise would only document a failure of human agency and imagination, not the irrelevance of regionalism in the lives of all Canadians.

What was clearly missing from our roundtable session was a view from other regions: the North, Quebec and Ontario. There are also other views to be expressed on the regions represented in the five papers presented at the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference and I am certain that the editors of *Acadiensis* would welcome further submissions on this timely and important topic.

MARGARET CONRAD
University of New Brunswick

6 McKay, “A Note on ‘Region’”, p. 92.