

A Rich and Hearty Broth: The Oxford Companion to Canadian History

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The Oxford Companion to Canadian History

THE OXFORD COMPANION TO CANADIAN HISTORY (Don Mills, Oxford University Press, 2004) meets and exceeds many of the expectations of a modern compendium that is designed to capture the essential ingredients that comprise a nation's history. Edited by Gerald Hallowell, a retired senior editor at the University of Toronto Press and self-described fifth-generation Canadian, it is an unabashed celebration of the Canadian experience. Crafted to appeal to the general public and students of Canadian history from all walks of life and educational backgrounds, it offers a sweeping range of subjects, events and people that illustrate or have had a significant impact on the national experience. At the same time, lamentable and tragic moments in Canada's past are neither glossed over nor given short shrift. For example, the Grand Dérangement of the Acadians, the treatment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, the disenfranchisement of women, the prejudice against African Canadians and the numerous violent encounters between ethnic, religious and labour groups all receive comprehensive treatment. Hallowell, who displays a ready wit in the preface, makes the case for this unvarnished and populist portrayal of Canadian history. In a brief exposition of the subjective dynamic of making selections for entries and deciding what to leave out, he refers to his design to favor entries that might be characterized as "lowly sculpins" rather than "sleek and tasty halibut" (p. vii). Indeed, much of the material would not have garnered a second look in past generations of historical scholarship. Entries on Almighty Voice, a participant in the North-West Resistance, and the thalidomide crisis of the 1950s are presumably of Hallowell's "sculpin" genus.

The editor's spirited observations notwithstanding, the bulk of material is familiar and cast in fairly well-worn categories. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History* breaks no ground in its design. The entries are organized alphabetically, creatively cross-indexed in the text, and comprehensively indexed at the back of the volume. In the deep tradition of compendiums, this is largely a descriptive endeavor. The focus is on the who, what, where and when. The more complex how and why questions, presumably because of space limitations, receive more superficial treatment. As the editor notes, its 1,654 discrete entries provide "the basic details of the main events, institutions, places, and people in Canada's past" (p. vi). Its organization closely follows a design that generations of students of Canadian history have relied upon for a single reference to the country's past. This work shares the publisher of Norah Story's *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature*, which was published in 1967. Six years later William Toye, who focused primarily on the outpouring of literary contributions in the late 1960s and early 1970s, offered a *Supplement to the Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature*. Noting Story's towering achievement in composing all of the entries herself, Toye invited 37 contributors to write the discrete entries. Although Toye's volume serves as a model for Hallowell's compendium, the number of contributors has grown exponentially. Over 500 authors were selected by Hallowell and his editorial advisory board to contribute entries. Interestingly, at least one scholar – Carl Berger, who is widely

recognized as the dean of Canada's historiography written in English – contributed to both works. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History* is also more concise, less detailed and more opinionated – and thereby more lively – than multi-volume encyclopedias such as *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Hurtig Publishers) and the 14-volume *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (University of Toronto Press).

Hallowell offers a tribute to Story's ground-breaking work, yet he rather inexplicably notes that the current work "is in no way related to [her] pioneering volume" (p. ix). Without the benefit of knowing exactly what Hallowell meant by "related", this compendium surely exhibits a strong resemblance to the works of both Story and Toye. The lineage is altered, however, in two important thematic and structural ways. As the titles of their volumes suggest, both Story and Toye devoted a great deal of attention to Canadian literature; indeed, Toye's *Supplement* is mostly literary in its scope. Hallowell's enterprise, while it includes some entries on works of literature and a few Canadian novelists and poets, is essentially cast on a forge of historical themes and actors. Second, in a point that somewhat diminishes *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*'s usefulness, the entries include no sources or references to further readings. As Hallowell notes, the decision not to include this material was made "to maximize the space available for historical literature" (p. ix). Hallowell defends his decision by citing the many venues that are currently available and designed to provide bibliographic references as well as the ubiquitous search engines on the Internet. His argument holds some merit. Nonetheless, one of the important contributions of a work of this nature is to have the expert contributors identify the key works and resources that the interested reader can turn to first for more information on discrete subjects. Readers can certainly enter key words into their favorite search engine and, depending on the speed of their computer, they will soon be greeted by a cornucopia of information. But there is no filter available to judge intelligently the relative merits or probity of the sites or information that appears on the screen. Space considerations notwithstanding, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History* would have provided immeasurable service to its readers had it included sources and citations – at least in the cases of complex subjects and individuals who had a profound impact on Canada's historical development.

This work, published in 2004, will also serve as an illustration of the state of the art of the historical profession in the early-21st century. As Story and Toye's work captured the contemporary orientation of historical writing and literary contributions in the late-1960s and 1970s, which means it overwhelmingly reflected a nationalistic enthusiasm that was projected primarily through the scholarship of English Canadians, Hallowell and his editorial advisory board conscientiously sought out a broad spectrum of contributors. The authors, many of whom wrote multiple entries, represent a truly diverse population. They overwhelmingly come from Canada and, in the few cases that reside outside the country, such as Luca Codignola from Università di Genova and Betsy Beattie from the University of Maine, they are Canadian-born, received their education in Canadian institutions or work as academics or professionals in Canada. This observation in no way detracts from the volume; indeed, the opinions and orientations of the contributors, even in the relatively brief space of discrete entries that are typically a paragraph or two in length, give the volume a satisfying depth.

Nonetheless, the central guiding themes and familiar ideas that shape our

understanding of Canada's past serve as a leitmotif that brings the bulk of the discrete entries into a portrait of the country that is by nature a celebration. These mostly traditional themes include the premise of the three founding nations (Aboriginal peoples, the French fact and the English presence), the rich variety of ethnic, religious and national groups that have contributed to the national saga, the overarching national myths and ideals such as the evolutionary course of Canada's development and the popular notion of the "peaceable kingdom", the mosaic imagery that stands in such stark contrast to the American melting pot ideal, and the country's extraordinary if not unique contributions as a model to the world as a diverse yet tolerant nation-state. Adhering closely to the familiar themes that comprise our understanding of Canada's past, the contributors reflect the country's diverse landscape. They are drawn from all regions of the country and they reflect a conscious attempt to bridge the classic historiographic divides that have been shaped by language, ideology and methodology. The editor notes, for example, that 70 entries were translated from French. The overwhelming number of contributors are active or retired academic historians, and many of the most recognizable names in the historical profession grace the more than 700 pages of *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*. Also included are entries from anthropologists, archaeologists, political scientists, linguists, ethnologists, geographers, folklorists, sociologists and musicologists. Voices from outside academe are represented as well. These include independent historians, archivists, journalists, lawyers, physicians, physical educators, librarians, urban and regional planners, and members of Parks Canada and other provincial or federal organizations.

The resulting blend of voices is a particular strength of this work. The relatively brief entries notwithstanding, interpretations and opinions come through in full force. A close reading of the entries will provide readers with a working model of the diversity of historical opinions from some of the country's best practitioners of Canadian history. Examples of this abound, but a brief selection should make the case. Numerous scholars of Aboriginal history articulate the role that ethnohistory has played in the last generation of scholarship in expanding the more traditional reliance on textual and documentary sources.¹ Largely overlooked individuals such as the Tagish trader Keish receive a discrete entry; key episodes such as the Red River Resistance are based on the most up-to-date historical scholarship. Similarly, scholars engaged in women's history ensure that their subject completes the journey from the periphery to the center of Canada's history. Veronica Strong-Boag, in an entry on anti-feminism, offers a compelling critique to counteract the "diatribes from right-wingers" and other "vitriolic assaults" on feminists and other groups in Canada's past and present. P.B. Waite, in a characteristically wry entry on historian Donald Grant Creighton, opines that his subject was "long a friend of French-Canadian historians until the 1960s, when too many took up separatism". Similarly, entries on class, spiritualism, abortion, crime and punishment, gay men and lesbians, and eugenics – to cite just a few – aptly illustrate the ways in which the focal points for understanding Canadian history have in some cases shifted profoundly since Story and Teye's offerings.

On the other hand, the hoary language for couching the more traditional

¹ Note the editor's sensible discussion of the overriding use of "aboriginal" to describe the groups that also are called "First Nations," "Natives" and "Indians" (p. viii).

approaches to Canadian history is ubiquitous. The essay on Dominion invokes a reference to the “founding fathers” – just one example of the overarching nationalistic tone that infuses many of the entries. As should be expected in a compendium of this nature, the key episodes that mark the country’s transformation from colony to nation, thoroughly explored in over a century of scholarship produced by professional historians, comprise the bulk of *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*. Readers find a wide variety of entries on conflicts (large and small and domestic and foreign, from the Shiners’ War to the Persian Gulf War), political parties (right, left and center, from the Red Tories to the Rhinoceros Party), politicians (George-Étienne Cartier and Tim Buck), businesses and corporate entities (brewing and distilling and telecommunication), and foreign relations and diplomacy (Rush-Bagot Agreement and peacekeeping).

The entries represent the full gamut of Canadian history, from pre-contact to the age of globalization. The editor and contributors are to be applauded for designing sensible categories that collect disparate but related material under single headings. A good example of this is the section on “colonization companies in the Canadas”, which addresses a number of emigration endeavors during the 19th century. Yet given the extraordinary number of contributors, the entries are quite mixed in strength. Moreover, whether the length of the entries was determined by the editorial board or by the contributing author, the essays range widely. In many cases an entry’s length directly reflects the centrality of the subject to Canadian history. Few would question that the section on the Second World War should span almost two full pages while the Calgary Stampede should merit the briefest of descriptions. Yet many entries are rather disproportionate in their length; the space devoted to them seems to bear no relationship to their relative contributions to Canadian history. Rather baffling is why the section on cartoonists, as intriguing a subject as it is, gets more space than the seigneurial system. Similarly, the entry on country doctors, complete with a detailed list of practitioners since the 18th century, eclipses the space devoted to Confederation. These kinds of nuances are perhaps to be expected in a work of this scope and with such a diversity of contributors in the mix. Still, given the editorial staff’s decision to abandon source references in the interest of saving on space, perhaps some of the more lengthy entries on dance, book publishing and photography could have stood a bit more editorial pruning to free up some room for entries that receive surprisingly brief attention, such as those on Samuel de Champlain, Susanna Strickland Moodie and boundaries.

Strengths of *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History* include the broad representation given to ethnic, racial and national groups. As noted above, Aboriginal peoples garner concentrated attention on religious beliefs, warfare, treaty rights and numerous individuals. Shanawdidhit, the last-known member of the Beothuk of Newfoundland, is recognized along with the more well-known Louis Riel. Although this reviewer is not a specialist on Aboriginal history, the focus on groups and individuals of Native peoples seems to be weighted in favor of the western and northern regions of the country. Ethnic and national groups also are strongly represented; they comprise some of the most popular subjects in Canadian history. Separate entries include the groups that are still heavily represented in the genealogical makeup of many Canadians, including Scots, Italians, Germans, Irish, Ukrainians and Japanese Canadians. Smaller groups – for example the Orkneymen,

Doukhobors and Finns – also make the editorial cut. Other groups, however, particularly those representing immigration patterns to Canada in the 20th century, are not given discrete entries. Ethnic and national groups from the Carribean, Africa and Southeast Asia are under-represented in this compendium.

The Oxford Companion to Canadian History is also useful for gauging modern Canadian historiography. The overwhelming majority of references to scholars and interpretations favor great historians, national approaches and the centrality of Ontario and Quebec. However, careful readers will glean a treasure trove of information from Carl Berger's nicely distilled entry on "history and historians" as well as from individual entries on historians and intellectuals that include the likes of Diamond Jenness, J.W. Dafoe, François-Xavier Garneau, O.D. Skelton and Frank Underhill. Deserving of individual entries, yet rather glaring in their absence, are some of the more modern practitioners of Quebec's history and the history of the Atlantic region. To illustrate this point, the metropolitan and Laurentian theses appear in discrete entries yet equally important historiographical traditions in Quebec, such as the so-called Montreal and Laval schools, are elusive. Absent from this work, or in a couple of cases the recipients of the briefest of mentions, are the crucial contributions from francophone scholars such as Fernand Ouellet, Marcel Trudel, Jean Hamelin, Michel Brunet and Maurice Séguin. The balance of historiographical attention in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History* is weighted on the side of historians who write in English and who devote attention to the more broadly nationalistic themes in Canada's history.

A similar point can be made for the history of the Atlantic region. The entries that have to do with Canada's four easternmost provinces are fairly comprehensive, and they run the gamut of meta-categories of political, social, intellectual, economic and class histories that are a typical feature of this companion. Thus readers will find entries on familiar topics, including several entries on Acadians, the New England Planters, the Prince Edward Island Land Question and Joseph Howe. The Atlantic region's key cities, political figures, businesses and dramatic events take center stage in the compendium. Happily, less well-known subjects also make the grade, which no doubt reflects the editor's interest in including a number of "sculpins". These include "Nova Scarcity", Pier 21 and the line from the Newfoundland ballad of the 19th century: "Come near at your peril, Canadian wolf". Perhaps the most obscure example that merited inclusion, perhaps because of Hallowell's home base in Nova Scotia, is the entry on the August gales that have periodically devastated shipping near Sable Island and the port of Lunenburg. These are entertaining and educational entries, to be sure, and this reviewer is certainly pleased to find their inclusion. One additional point needs to be made about the Atlantic Canadian offerings: although the material on New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador was composed by some of the region's finest and most productive scholars, glaring in their absence are some of the historians who were the driving force behind the movement to galvanize and define Atlantic history in the late-20th century. Many were instrumental in creating *Acadiensis*. Missing are detailed references to or entries from E.R. Forbes, Phillip A. Buckner, T.W. Acheson, Murray Young, William Spray, Graeme Wynn and Rusty Bitterman. Clearly not all voices can be included in an enterprise of this nature, and no doubt some of the Atlantic region's historians were contacted by the editorial board and declined to offer a piece. Nonetheless, the rather

dramatic absence of attention to the historians who crafted the resurgence of modern Atlantic Canadian history is notable.

Yet these are essentially minor quibbles, and clearly some fall in the purview of this reviewer's special interests. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History* is a formidable achievement, and it does an admirable job of capturing the layered complexity of Canadian history. This reviewer is not sure if Sir John A. would have deigned to be characterized as one of Hallowell's "sleek halibut", and clearly a Dene/Chipewyan woman – Thanadelthur – would bear no relationship to the editor's "sculpin". Yet these two entries illustrate the impressive range of this work. The book contains the people, events and issues that would probably be on the tip of any educated Canadian's tongue; but it also includes entries that capture, or more to the point restore, many of the more elusive themes and largely forgotten people in the country's past. This well-indexed volume, which includes a number of helpful maps and lists of monarchs, Canada's governors general, prime ministers and provincial premiers, should stand the test of time. It will surely take its place in the proud lineage of Norah Story's and William Toye's contributions for Oxford University Press. Moreover, it is emblematic of what historians find important about their country's past in the early-21st century; it is a snapshot, taken in time, of a mature nation-state. It is a reflection and a reminder of the many layers of understanding that we need to reach in order to grapple sensibly with the collective story of over 30 million people who currently reside in Canada. Because Hallowell invoked a culinary reference with his metaphor of the "tasty halibut", perhaps it is fitting to build on that theme in a whimsical final thought. Canada's onion has here been peeled by a master chef and his more than 500 sous-chefs. Yet another popular gastronomic aphorism, however, clearly does not apply: many cooks are responsible for *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*, but the broth is certainly not spoiled as a result. To the contrary, it is rich and satiating.

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