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Regionalism Unmasked

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Regionalism Unmasked

SINCE THE 1960S THE SO-CALLED "national" approach to the interpretation of the Canadian past has come under a destructive barrage of criticism. Indeed the publication in 1976 of *The Writing of Canadian History*, by Carl Berger, might be viewed as a lengthy epitaph on the headstone of the national school's grave. That epitaph gave Caesar his due, noted his failings, and pointed tentatively to the "new circumstances and novel questions" that might lead to a new synthesis. One of what the cognoscenti might call new paradigms was "regionalism". As the country became more fragmented, many historians began to argue that regionalism had always been the basic functioning unit of Canadian society. Northrop Frye gave his imprimatur to the view that region or locale had always nourished the creative imagination. Many other writers, notably the contributors to David Bercuson's collection *Canada and the Burden of Unity* (1977), advanced the argument that national unity had never been anything but a smokescreen for Central Canadian regionalism and domination of the "rags and patches of Confederation". A variation of this view, of course, had long been fundamental to the Quebec nationalist account of the Canadian past. Michel Brunet, for example, asserted that "national unity" was merely a rationalization for Canadian domination of *Canadien*.

In reality there was little that was especially novel about these ideas, which are as old as Confederation itself. In his well-known essay "Clio in Canada", first published in 1946, the late W.L. Morton made explicit what had long been implicit in the Innis-Creighton laurentian thesis: the metropolitan-hinterland relationship was not one of equality.[1] The seeds planted by that Morton article have been germinating for a long time. But today they are not only in full flower but there are even some signs that the full cycle, the return to seed, may be at hand. That harvest, in the form of L.D. McCann, ed., *A Geography of Canada: Heartland and Hinterland* (Scarborough, Prentice-Hall Canada, 1982), has yielded the first full-scale attempt to reconstruct the Canadian past out of the building blocks of regionalism, with the metropolitan-hinterland thesis as the organizing principle. It is entirely fitting that the first attempt at such a synthesis should come from a group of geographers since the concept of region is largely, if not entirely, geographic. But it is also true that historical geographers, including many of the 15 contributors to this volume, have made a major contribution to the rewriting of Canadian history over the past decade or so. Consequently *Heartland and Hinterland* is not only an attempt at synthesis based on the concept of regional interaction, but it is also a showpiece of the often excellent historical work of Canadian geographers.

A review of a book by several authors must commence with a cliché: the quality of the 14 chapters varies considerably in content, style and even to some

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1   W.L. Morton, "Clio in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XV, 3 (1946).

extent in approach. Two chapters are superb, most are quite satisfactory, two or three disappointing. One, Peter Usher on the North is marred by moralizing, a characteristic which occasionally creeps into other essays. For some authors, regionalism, however defined, is assumed to be virtuous in the same fashion that nationalism once was. But taken as a whole the study — intended as a textbook — is scholarly, informative, well-organized and occasionally even evocatively written.

My major criticism of the book is that while the building-blocks are carefully laid out according to a blueprint provided in Professor McCann's lucid introductory chapter, the final shape of the structure remains unclear. That is because the volume lacks a proper concluding chapter, one which the editor himself should have composed in an effort to pull the book together, to explain to his readers how the concepts set out in the introduction, and applied by his authors, add up. What is the new Canada that has emerged? I do not mean by these remarks to denigrate the well-conceived chapter contributed by Cole Harris. As is usual with that writer the chapter is subtle, wide-ranging and filled with insights. It began life as a public lecture and certainly deserved publication — perhaps even in this book. But it is emphatically not a conclusion to this book. Indeed, as I shall suggest later, it may even contradict the basic assumption of this book.

Since the book lacks a sum, let me turn to a brief assessment of the parts. In general, the chapters on the hinterland (Newfoundland, the Maritimes, the Prairies, British Columbia and the North) are for the most part very well done. The heartland chapters (Ontario, Quebec) vary from satisfactory to disappointing. Graeme Wynn's "The Maritimes: the Geography of Fragmentation and Underdevelopment" is the finest section of the book. To this chapter we will surely all send our students for a relatively brief but profound account of Maritime development. It is clear in conception, rich in detail, scholarly in tone, humane in its conclusions and written in a style that reveals affection without sentimentality: "Maritime Canada is . . . an area poised between lingering past and uncertain future. In this difficult present, modernity challenges tradition; old ways retreat, but often begrudgingly; images of revitalization shimmer, but often as mirages. Saved from the worst consequences of economic decline by national fiscal policy the provinces have retained but slender control over their own destinies" (pp. 166-7). One reason for the success of Wynn's chapter is that the writer makes plain the distinctions among the three provinces in the area, and it is notable that in the sentence quoted it is the "provinces" not the "region" that become the point of reference. Moreover, the Maritimes fit more readily perhaps into the concept of "hinterland" than any other part of the country. Certainly, neither individually nor collectively can the Maritime provinces be a "hinterland" in the same sense as, say, Alberta.

And that brings me to the second superior chapter, P.J. Smith's "Alberta Since 1945: The Maturing Settlement System". In this essay "region" and "province" are quite explicitly identified. "The notion of a prairie region",

Smith writes, "is little better than an abstraction as far as most Albertans are concerned, in their everyday lives". The implication, since the pre-1945 history of Alberta is lumped into the chapter on Manitoba and Saskatchewan, is that Premier Lougheed's province no longer needs the shelter of regional identification and can go it alone. If this is not true of the other two prairie provinces, some explanation is surely needed. Are we to assume that the prairie region ("the western interior"), now contains only two provinces? For Smith, then, the question of hinterland and heartland is not merely one of Alberta and Central Canada but, just as importrant, it is the question of the Edmonton-Calgary corridor as heartland, with the remainder of the province as hinterland. Moreover, when he turns to the relationship of Alberta to the Canadian heartland, Smith shows how complex the relationship is; it is not merely one of domination and dependence when the hinterland can threaten to let the heartland bastards freeze in the dark.

The strength of Smith's chapter is especially clear when it is read with the contribution of Brenton M. Barr and John C. Lehr freshly in mind. They attempt to deal with all three prairie provinces. But what works, at least to some extent, in the pre-1945 period just falls apart after that. Though the three provinces obviously have some common elements, it is increasingly obvious that the three areas were fairly distinct right from their beginnings: their geographies, settlement patterns and economies varied greatly, while their political histories have very little in common. They are, in short, provinces first and part of a region only secondarily.

The three chapters devoted to the heartland lack the strengths of the Wynn and Smith contributions. Donald Kerr's "The Emergence of the Industrial Heartland, 1750-1950" not surprisingly is the best: a vast amount of information is presented skilfully. But he just has too much to do and at times, as in the case of the Ouellet-McCallum controversy, he confuses as much as clarifies an important issue. Maurice Yeates on the contemporary period is, once again, informative but his chapter reads like a somewhat hastily prepared research report and is far more preoccupied with industrial and urban growth than with the heartland-hinterland axis. Within Ontario, and within Quebec, there are heartland-hinterland relationships that require very close attention. Where, for example, do we look to find the hinterland of Montreal now that the Chairman of the Board of the Bank of Montreal has moved to Calgary? Finally, Eric Waddell's chapter on Quebec is the most unsatisfactory in the book. The theme he presents is interesting enough. He writes about Quebec as a cultural homeland for the francophones who inhabit the North American hinterland. This is, of course, a valid exploration. But it leaves almost totally unexplored the types of questions that the other chapters focus on: the economic and social consequences of heartland-hinterland relations in Canada, and within the region itself. Finally, it is a shame that no author really attempted to deal with Labrador within the general thesis of the book for, as Les Harris has written elsewhere, "Newfoundland has been left with the difficult problem of providing

adequate and costly services to the scattered population of the seacoast of Labrador while Quebec has been permitted to alienate all the vast resources of the interior".[2] Where then is the heartland of that hinterland?

Quite apart from the very considerable value of the individual contributions to this volume, the book must also be judged as an attempt to clarify certain issues about Canada's past and present. Once again I must lament the reluctance of the editor to put the parts of the book together in a concluding chapter. What are the forces, is there a dynamic, that explains the continued, if sometimes precarious, existence of the geographical entity called Canada? Is there anything more than habit and inertia? Do heartland and hinterland really imply polar opposites, even winners and losers? These questions remain largely unasked in the present book.

My second concern is a related one. Reading this book, and some other recent contributions to Canadian social science, I have begun to doubt seriously the existence of the phenomena we have for so long called regions, though regionalism as a rationalization of certain interests may have some reality. Let me begin with Professor McCann's laudable attempt to define "region". He writes: "A region . . . is a homogeneous segment of the earth's surface with physical and human characteristics distinct from those of neighbouring areas. As such, a region is sufficiently unified for its people to be conscious of its geographic character, that is, to possess a sense of identity distinct from those of other regions. The term regionalism applies to a society's identification with a territorial unit. Regionalism is therefore shaped and given expression by the interplay of land, economy, and society; by the emergence of a group consciousness that voices regional grievances and demands; and by the behaviour of society as expressed most commonly through political actions" (p. vii). While no definition will satisfy every case — and one could quibble about a number of points in this one — the really significant point is that this definition applies at least as well, and perhaps better, to a province as to a region. So why not call a region what it really is — a province. The best chapters in *Heartland and Hinterland* accept that fact explicitly or implicitly. So do several other important recent works. *Small Worlds: Provinces and Parties in Canadian Political Life* by David J. Elkins and Richard Simeon,[3] while sometimes maddeningly confused in its use of the province-region terms, in fact admits that they are the same. So, too, the heart of Roger Gibbins's fine book *Prairie Politics and Society: Regionalism in Decline*[4] is a demonstration of the importance of "provincialism" rather than "regionalism" in understanding the prairie west. Moreover, when he attempts to demonstrate that there is a prairie state of mind (Western Alienation) he falls into complete contradiction since he uses

2 Leslie Harris, "The Atlantic Region: An Expedient Fiction", in John Evans, *Options* (Toronto, 1977), p. 51.

3 (Toronto, 1980).

4 (Toronto, 1980).

exclusively Alberta (sometimes only Calgary) data to support his case. And while Larry Pratt and John Richards have brilliantly analyzed *Prairie Capitalism*,[5] they not only ignore Manitoba, but they also distinguish very sharply between the Alberta and Saskatchewan versions.

This brings me to Cole Harris' chapter which serves the purpose of a conclusion better perhaps than was intended. In essence it is the story of the triumph of province over locality and region. For Harris it is the province that has become the recognizable building-block of Canadian society. He writes: "At Confederation the local settlement was still the predominant scale of Canadian life, but settlements that once provided definition and defence for traditional ways have been overridden by modern transportation and communications. Their isolation and stability have largely gone; they survive in some urban shadow of an urbanized and industrialized society. In such a society, horizons are broadened and the local defence of custom is superceded. The state assumes a growing symbolic and practical importance. In this situation, the Canadian province, with its constitutionally defined power, its growing political history, and a location that bears some relation to the fragmented structure, replaces both the local settlements that no longer support Canadian life, and the broader but amorphous regions that have no clear political definition. The provinces are crystal clear. Their territorial boundaries are precise. For all the arguments, their powers are explicit. Their scale is supportable within modern technology. As political territories they reflect something of the country's island structure, they enormously simplify Canadian reality, and it is this simplified and thereby politically more powerful regionalism that now confronts the concept and the sentiment of Canada" (pp. 471-2).

That puts the case very precisely and clarifies a problem which has muddled our minds for at least the past two decades. Even though some of that muddle still exists in its pages, *Heartland and Hinterland* can really lead to no other conclusion than that, as a tool of analysis, "regionalism" is a concept whose time has gone. It may still have its political uses, of course, for as Roger Gibbins reminds us it is still possible "to cloak provincial self-interest in the garb of regionalism if only to mask the rawer edge of provincial ambition".

This, of course, is not to argue that all of the concerns that have been part of the regional approach to rewriting our history should be discarded. Stripped of its rhetoric there remains with the regional approach, especially as practised by historical geographers, a legitimate preoccupation with some profoundly important aspects of our history: class, sex, family, ethnicity, for example. Graeme Wynn's *Timber Colony*,[6] Conrad Heidenreich's *Huronia*,[7] and Arthur Ray's *Indians in the Fur Trade*[8] are three obvious examples of what can be achieved.

5   (Toronto, 1979).
6   (Toronto, 1981).
7   (Toronto, 1971).
8   (Toronto, 1974).

That *Heartland and Hinterland* does not quite succeed in its attempt to bring this type of study to the level of synthesis is merely proof that more local studies are needed. In the meantime historians have much to learn from Professor McCann and the historical geographers whose work has brightly illuminated some shadowy dimensions of the Canadian past.

RAMSAY COOK

The Vernacular Tradition in Atlantic Canada

IN EUROPEAN CULTURE THERE ARE TWO great strains, the one line going back to classical Greece and Rome and the other to the local cultures of medieval Europe. Regional or national or vernacular cultures have managed to survive despite the dominance of the Greco-Roman strain in the West, especially since the Renaissance when the social hierarchy which dictated matters of taste and cultural direction placed the culture of Greece and Rome in domineering ascendancy over the national cultures of Europe. The cultural dictates of the Renaissance established a hegemony which was hostile to anything local or regional. Even when the nationalist-oriented Reformation occurred in the Western Church, the cultural inheritance of Rome survived in Protestant countries as much as in ones which remained Catholic. The classic example of the cultural schizophrenia which resulted is Dr. Johnson in the 18th century attempting to fit the fullness of Shakespeare's English genius into the squares of the Renaissance notion of classical dramatic unities. Dr. Johnson loved Shakespeare yet was committed to a cultural regime which saw Shakespeare's "native woodnotes wild" as barbarous. It was not until the 19th-century romantic and French Revolutions overthrew the supremacist ideology of the Renaissance that Swedes, Germans, Hungarians, Irishmen and Englishmen began to discover the excellence of their own national cultures. But the intervening centuries had done great psychological damage to the self-esteem of vernacular cultures.

The culture of Atlantic Canada is a complex and varied one which, in the main, reflects these tensions within the European cultural tradition. Moreover, in our own country Renaissance cultural imperialism has been supplemented by political, cultural and economic domination by France, Britain and the United States. Whatever culture existed here at the local or regional level was either given no regard at all or seen as a debased form of something already suspect. Institutions such as the school and the university were witting or unwitting agents of an elitist culture which was presented as superior and hostile to the culture in which most people were raised. The superior-inferior or metropolis-hinterland syndrome vitiated the revival of cultures which had been victims of it. A Welsh-speaking friend had the experience of going to a Welsh school where the teaching was in the Welsh language but in a "superior" form to the Welsh