

How Wide Is the Atlantic Ocean? Not Wide Enough!

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How Wide Is the Atlantic Ocean? Not Wide Enough!

TWO RECENT BOOKS, WHEN JUXTAPOSED, ACCENTUATE THE demise of old-fashioned North American colonial history. “We are all Atlanticists now”, declares David Armitage in a key theoretical chapter of his and Michael Braddick’s *The British Atlantic World*, “or so it would seem from the explosion of interest in the Atlantic and the Atlantic world as subjects of study among historians of North and South America, the Caribbean, Africa and western Europe”.¹ Meanwhile Daniel Richter, in *Facing East from Indian Country*, spells out the interpretive consequences of taking a different vantage point: “If we shift our perspective to view the past in a way that faces east from Indian country, history takes on a very different appearance. Native Americans appear in the foreground, and Europeans enter from distant shores. North America becomes the ‘old world’ and Western Europe the ‘new’, [the Mississippian city of] Cahokia becomes the center and Plymouth Rock the periphery, and themes rooted in Indian country rather than across the Atlantic begin to shape the larger story”.² With pressures being exerted from both eastern and western directions, the old certainty that there was a colonial period in North American history – and that historians should understand it primarily through the study of colonies and colonists – has come to seem antiquated and even naïve. Healthy and inevitable as historical revisionism is, however, in this and other instances it raises the difficult question of how to replace a worn-out interpretive model. Atlantic history offers a good first step, but without a close articulation with Aboriginal history it has limited explanatory power as an interpretive representation of eastern North America in the early modern era. Closer to the mark, in my view, is an effort to combine Aboriginal, colonial and imperial experiences and measure the results of interactions among them. Canadian history offers unique and revealing examples, as I will attempt to demonstrate. For convenience, I will take 1763 as an approximate cut-off date for the early modern era in the history of what is now Canada although this is, of course, an arbitrary and debatable dividing line.

In the United States, the development of a historiography of the Atlantic world has been closely (and rightly) associated with the work of the Harvard University historian Bernard Bailyn and with the participants in the International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World held regularly at Harvard since 1995. In particular, Bailyn’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Voyagers to the West* explored movement across the Atlantic during the mid-1770s, taking migration to Nova Scotia as a major case study.³ As an example of the collective force of the work of participants in the

1 David Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History”, in Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (New York, 2002), p. 11. An earlier version of this essay was presented at a workshop entitled “How Wide is the Atlantic Ocean?” at *Presence of the Past: A National Conference on the Teaching, Learning and Communicating the History of Canada*, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, 24 October 2003.

2 Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), p. 8.

3 Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York, 1986).

seminar, there is no better example than Armitage and Braddick's *The British Atlantic World*. Canadian history and Canadian historians have other landmarks. Phillip Buckner's presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association in 1993 took issue with Canadian historians' preoccupation with the forging of a Canadian national identity at the expense of recognizing the centrality of the imperial experience. Buckner was concerned primarily with the post-1815 British empire and with 19th-century anglophone Canada, but the argument that imperial and colonial histories must be understood together also had a more general application.⁴ Meanwhile, Ian K. Steele published an innovative study entitled *The English Atlantic*, identifying the Atlantic Ocean both as a means of communication rather than as a barrier and as a means by which a transatlantic "associational community" could be established and maintained.⁵ More recently, Kenneth J. Banks has studied the French Atlantic, also from the perspective of communications, and has argued that the French state was unable to impose a social or cultural order on its overseas settlements to a degree that would have transformed the "vieilles colonies" into a coherent empire.⁶ Also contributing to an understanding of Canadian history in an Atlantic context are studies in the areas of migration (such as those of Hubert Charbonneau and Leslie Choquette) and governance (such as the work of Elizabeth Mancke).⁷

The profound importance of Aboriginal history, first and foremost in its own right but also because colonial and imperial issues cannot be properly understood without their Aboriginal contexts, is so self-evident that it needs only brief illustration. Twentieth-century Canada produced the first-ever ethnohistory in Alfred G. Bailey's 1937 *The Conflict of European and Eastern Algonkian Cultures*, and this work was followed after a lengthy interval by the distinguished studies of scholars such as Bruce G. Trigger, Cornelius Jaenen and Denys Delâge.⁸ Soon afterwards came the publication of justly praised general histories of First Nations by Olive Dickason and J.R. Miller.⁹ That the pace has only quickened since the turn of the present century can be illustrated by taking the single example of studies in Mi'kmaq history. These years

4 Phillip Buckner, "Whatever Happened to the British Empire?", *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, new series, 4 (1993), pp. 3-32.

5 Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic, 1675-1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community* (New York, 1986), pp. 270-1.

6 Kenneth J. Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763* (Montreal and Kingston, 2002), esp. pp. 218-20. See also James Pritchard, *In Search of Empire: The French in the Americas, 1670-1730* (Cambridge, 2004), esp. pp. 420-2.

7 See, for example, Hubert Charbonneau et al., *Naissance d'une population : les Français établis au Canada au XVIII^e siècle* (Montréal, 1987); Leslie Choquette, *Frenchmen into Peasants: Modernity and Tradition in the Peopling of French Canada* (Cambridge, MA, 1997) and Elizabeth Mancke, "Another British America: A Canadian Model for the Early Modern British Empire", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 25 (1997), pp. 1-36.

8 Alfred G. Bailey, *The Conflict of European and Eastern Algonkian Cultures, 1504-1700: A Study in Canadian Civilization* (Saint John, 1937); Denys Delâge, *Le Pays renversé* (Montréal, 1985); Cornelius J. Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Toronto, 1976); Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, 2 vols. (Montreal, 1976).

9 Olive Patricia Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Toronto, 1992); J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto, 1989).

have seen the appearance not only of a second edition of Daniel N. Paul's *We Were Not the Savages: A Mi'kmaq Perspective on the Collision Between European and Native American Civilizations*, but also of works by Geoffrey Plank and William Wicken, which offer innovative interpretations of important aspects of 18th-century Mi'kmaq history.¹⁰

The steps taken in recent decades towards a more realistic appraisal of the central importance of Aboriginal history to the history of Canada during the early modern period are praiseworthy. Yet it remains uncertain whether the scope of the remarkable ethnocentricity that has characterized the traditional master narrative of Canadian history has even yet been fully exposed. To do so is not the central purpose of this paper, but in order to put the Canadian dimension of the history of the Atlantic world in something like its proper perspective, it is important to reflect briefly on some geographical realities. By the year 1700, the areas of what is now Canada that could be said realistically to be under non-Aboriginal control – excluding territorially isolated forts and trading outposts – were restricted to a portion of the St. Lawrence Valley, the major Acadian communities and coastlines of southeastern Newfoundland occupied by English and French residents. Even by 1763, with the main exceptions of the establishment of new French settlements in the colony of Île Royale and the British foundation of Halifax, the extensions of non-Aboriginal territorial control had largely been modest and incremental despite some population growth.¹¹

Thus, if we are to take as the unit of analysis the geographical extent of what is now Canada, there is not the slightest ambiguity about the pre-eminence that Aboriginal rather than non-Aboriginal history should have. It is true, of course, that the influence of the non-Aboriginal presence – through trade, technology and environmental change – reached much further than the areas of actual territorial control. But given that all of these processes of non-Aboriginal influence were managed to a greater or lesser degree by Aboriginal leaders, territorial control remains a consideration of fundamental importance for the historian. In population terms also, the non-Aboriginal presence by 1763 in what is now Canada was outnumbered by a factor of at least four to one.¹² Even in the small portions of territory where non-Aboriginal sway prevailed, Aboriginal military power frequently offered the possibility of reclamation. The largest of the *Canadien* settlements of the St. Lawrence valley represented, in all practical terms, an exception to this rule, especially after the

10 Daniel N. Paul, *We Were Not the Savages: A Mi'kmaq Perspective on the Collision Between European and Native American Civilizations*, 2nd ed. (Halifax, 2000); Geoffrey Plank, *An Unsettled Conquest: The British Campaign Against the Peoples of Acadia* (Philadelphia, 2001); William C. Wicken, *Mi'kmaq Treaties on Trial: History, Land, and Donald Marshall Junior* (Toronto, 2002). Also dealing in part with the Mi'kmaq history of the early-18th century is John G. Reid et al., *The "Conquest" of Acadia, 1710: Imperial, Colonial, and Aboriginal Constructions* (Toronto, 2004).

11 For elaboration of this argument, including a map representing the year 1700, see Emerson W. Baker and John G. Reid, "Amerindian Power in the Early Modern Northeast: A Reappraisal", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 61 (2004), pp. 77-106.

12 This statement is based on taking the already-conservative estimate of 500,000 for the pre-contact Aboriginal population of what is now Canada, reducing it by 20 per cent to accommodate the impact of epidemic disease and other demographic threats in eastern areas, and then taking a generous estimation of 100,000 for non-Aboriginal (French and British) populations. See Dickason, *Canada's First Nations*, p. 63.

conclusion of peace with the Houdenasaunee in 1701. As late as in 1768, however, a British governor of Nova Scotia was reporting to London that in the event of a determined Aboriginal assault nothing of the colonial settlements outside of Halifax itself would survive.¹³

Early modern Canadian history, therefore, is primarily Aboriginal history. The non-Aboriginal presence was significant in some places, but nowhere did it predominate over any but the most restricted of geographical areas. In varying degrees and with varying chronologies, the same point can be made with respect to other parts of eastern North America. Colonial populations were larger and denser in the British colonies of the eastern seaboard, and yet as late as the early decades of the 18th century there were very few areas where – whether through trade, diplomacy or military force – Aboriginal nations were truly incapable of making their influence felt.¹⁴ Thus, to understand the Atlantic world with genuine explanatory power, an Aboriginal dimension is just as essential as the imperial and colonial dimensions.

Because this is a three-component model, it follows that there were many distinct combinations that shaped the human experience of the Atlantic world at different times and places within the early modern era. In the Thirteen Colonies, which later formed the United States, the rapidly expanding colonial population led to the emergence during the first half of the 18th century of an unusual and – in global terms – thoroughly anomalous situation in which the relationship between imperial outreach and colonial entities attained an importance that locally overshadowed the depleted and displaced Aboriginal nations. Nowhere in what is now Canada was this the case in the era before 1763.

In Newfoundland, colonial and Aboriginal populations interacted separately with the imperial presence, defining that presence broadly to include not only the state – which, other than in the French colony of Plaisance between 1661 and 1713, was formed through custom rather than institutional structure – but also English-based merchant interests. The imperial significance of Newfoundland, which rivaled or exceeded that of any other part of North America to which European interests extended, was not measured primarily in terms of colonial settlement but rather in terms of Newfoundland's ability to supply nutrition for rapidly growing western European populations. Important as settlement became in its interdependence with the north Atlantic fisheries, it grew – here, as in many other parts of the world where imperial interests were at play – as a complement to commercial enterprise rather than as a state-sanctioned goal.¹⁵ Aboriginal responses were framed accordingly, with the

13 Lord William Campbell to Lord Hillsborough, 25 October 1768, Great Britain, Public Record Office, CO217/45, ff. 272-3. For further discussion of the context of Campbell's statement, see John G. Reid, "Pax Britannica or Pax Indigena? Planter Nova Scotia (1760-1782) and Competing Strategies of Pacification", *Canadian Historical Review*, 85 (2004), pp. 669-92. On the peace of 1701, see Gilles Havard, *La grande paix de Montréal: les voies de la diplomatie franco-amérindienne* (Montréal, 1992).

14 This theme is further developed in Baker and Reid, "Amerindian Power in the Early Modern Northeast: A Reappraisal".

15 See Jerry Bannister, *The Rule of the Admirals: Law, Custom, and Naval Government in Newfoundland, 1699-1832* (Toronto, 2003) and Peter E. Pope, *Fish into Wine: The Newfoundland Plantation in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004).

Beothuk in particular adopting a successful strategy of avoiding contact with non-Aboriginal residents while acquiring European metal goods by harvesting from seasonally abandoned fishing sites. It is true, of course, that this same strategy proved damaging and eventually catastrophic as settlement expanded in the later decades of the 18th century; however, as the late Ralph Pastore pointed out, to view the Beothuk only as “a doomed people” is anachronistic and misleading.¹⁶ Thus in Newfoundland the imperial Atlantic of the codfish trade exerted a crucial influence, with Aboriginal and colonial populations relating disconnectedly to that influence.

Acadia/Nova Scotia offered a clearly different experience from that of Newfoundland. Here the imperial influence, both commercial and through the state, was weak and intermittent throughout the early modern period, with only two principal exceptions. One of them was the French colony of Île Royale from 1713 to 1758, regarding which A.J.B. Johnston has recently written of the search for a well-ordered community that united both colonists and state officials.¹⁷ The second was the British presence at Halifax, established in 1749, which created a powerful though geographically circumscribed military sphere of influence. It was sufficient to enforce the expulsion of the Acadians between 1755 and 1762 and to play a role in the storming of Louisbourg in 1758, but this military influence could never impose imperial control over Mi'kmaq and Wulstukwiuk (Maliseet) territories until reinforced by many thousands of Loyalist migrants during the 1780s. Thus, in general, the history of Acadia/Nova Scotia during the early modern period was one of necessary coexistence. The imperial state, whether French or British, could not safely be ignored by either colonial or Aboriginal populations, but prudent imperial administrators recognized – until 1749 at least – that coexistence and a negotiated form of imperialism was for them a necessity rather than a choice. Aboriginal and colonial populations, meanwhile, lived generally with mutual toleration and mutual forbearance. The non-Aboriginal population exceeded the Aboriginal population from approximately 1720 onwards, but this was balanced by the broader territorial control and the effective leadership structures of the Aboriginal nations. Even after the Acadian expulsion, coexistence generally prevailed as former Acadian areas were resettled by New England Planters and other British and British-sponsored settlers.

In Canada (that is, the St. Lawrence valley), a different complex of coexistences prevailed, with the French state as an active participant. While the state sought to assert extensive powers in colonial settings where it faced lesser resistance from entrenched provincial political interests and legal systems than in France itself, there were always limitations on its ability to formulate effective plans or to impose its authority.¹⁸ Governors who sought to control the course of French-Aboriginal relations found that ultimately they had to rely on Aboriginal protocols of negotiation and gift-giving in order to construct effective networks of alliance. Intendants seeking

16 Ralph Pastore, “The Sixteenth Century: Aboriginal Peoples and European Contact”, in Phillip A. Buckner and John G. Reid, eds., *The Atlantic Region to Confederation: A History* (Toronto and Fredericton, 1994), p. 32.

17 A.J.B. Johnston, *Control and Order in French Colonial Louisbourg* (East Lansing, MI, 2001), especially pp. 303-4.

18 See Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea*, esp. pp. 218-19; for a greater emphasis on the limitations and failures of the state, see also Pritchard, *In Search of Empire*.

to impose social order and political hierarchy similarly faced the necessity of reaching negotiated understandings, notably with the merchants who mediated the flow of both goods and information within and beyond the colony. As for relations between colonists and Aboriginal neighbours, the peace of 1701 brought to an end the era when Houdenasaunee attacks posed an immediate military threat. Yet the only real guarantee of immunity from other forms of Aboriginal hostility lay in the health of the necessary alliances, which depended in turn on the effectiveness of the state – assisted by the clergy – in negotiation. A different form of negotiation underpinned the fur trade, in which *Canadien* traders developed their year-to-year relationships with Aboriginal suppliers. In Canada, therefore, Aboriginal-imperial-colonial negotiation was a way of life, with the prominence of the state in these processes a distinguishing – though not a determining – element.

The fur trade was also a critical factor in social interactions west and south of Hudson Bay. While these areas may be seen as geographically far removed from the Atlantic Ocean, nevertheless the access of shipping from the Atlantic to Hudson Bay made this a part of the Atlantic world. It was one in which imperial-Aboriginal contacts essentially lacked the mediation of a colonial population, unless long-serving employees of the Hudson's Bay Company could be considered as such. Here, in the clearest sense, Rupert's Land was an imperial construction, while Cree and other Aboriginal leaders had no reason in the world to concede any territorial control other than on the actual sites of company installations. Personal affinities, though, existed independently of such abstractions as notional European claims. Inter-marriage between company employees and Aboriginal women, as historians such as Jennifer Brown and Sylvia Van Kirk have shown, formed the most visible evidence of the convergence of trading and family relationships.¹⁹

In conclusion, any proper understanding of the Atlantic world, as it embraced North America, must be based on considering the interaction of Aboriginal, imperial, and (if appropriate) colonial dimensions of the human experience in any given area. While this principle can be applied more widely than just to what is today known as Canada, its application to Canadian history does offer some distinctive patterns. Unlike the situation in the Thirteen Colonies, where large colonial populations and the increasing separation of the colonial from the imperial state meant that by the mid-18th century colonies themselves could frequently act in disregard of Aboriginal inhabitants and with some autonomy from imperial interests, the disparate portions of the Atlantic world that later became part of Canada consistently experienced both Aboriginal and imperial power in focused and definable forms. As Elizabeth Mancke has shown, governance patterns developed in the British empire of the 18th century that, while ultimately prompting rebellion in the predominantly settlement colonies that later formed the United States, continued to evolve in the British North America that remained.²⁰ In the more easterly portions of that British North America, late-18th-century immigration rendered Aboriginal nations less and less able to set the agenda

19 Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver, 1980); Sylvia Van Kirk, "*Many Tender Ties*": *Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg, 1980).

20 Mancke, "Another British America", especially pp. 28-9.

in encounters with colonists and imperial officials, but not before the conclusion of treaties that gave a permanent embodiment – however it might be ignored until the late-20th century – to the negotiated coexistences of earlier years. Those who experienced the early modern era in what is now Canada, whether in Aboriginal, imperial or colonial capacities, could neither avoid participating in the processes unleashed by global imperialism nor obscure the complex realities of a predominantly Aboriginal territory in which some colonial settlement existed. In this sense, while it is crucial for historians to understand the Atlantic world, the Atlantic Ocean itself is not quite wide enough to serve as a metaphor for these essential contexts of this era in Canadian history.

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