

Saint John: Port and City

R. A.J. McDonald

Volume 13, Number 1, Autumn 1983

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad13_1rv04

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

McDonald, R. A. (1983). Saint John:: Port and City. *Acadiensis*, 13(1), 149–154.

literature of Europe which comes to mind here is that of Ireland, where writers such as Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory produced great literature from the interplay of language and folklore.

In Atlantic Canada this same cross-fertilization is most strongly at work in the cultures of Acadia and of Newfoundland, where national languages exist side by side with a native folklore tradition. The most important thing that people such as Luc Lacourcière and Herbert Halpert have been and can be for people in this region is bolsterers of our people's confidence that to study themselves in the context of their own culture is the most important part of human life. As the Irish writer Patrick Kavanagh wrote in attempting to define the difference between "provincial" and "parochial": "the provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis. . . has had to say on the subject. . . . The Parochial mentality on the other hand never is in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish".

CYRIL BYRNE

Saint John: Port and City

HISTORIES OF CANADIAN COASTAL SOCIETIES invariably document the competing influences of land and sea. Newfoundland, the Maritime Provinces, and Vancouver Island have each experienced, at different times and in different ways, the complex and difficult task of choosing between coastal and oceanic ties or continental connections. The quest for an industrial economy led Newfoundlanders to abandon first their Atlantic fishery and eventually their trans-Atlantic colonial status in favour of economic and political modernization, ending in Confederation with Canada.¹ Vancouver Island joined Canada only reluctantly, pressured by the imperial government and economic necessity; it succeeded in maintaining its Pacific trade and British outlook for a quarter-century after the constitutional union, but was finally drawn by the impact of railways into a more transcontinental orbit.² Perhaps best known to historians is the Maritime colonies' difficult adjustment to the Canadian economic and political system, a subject explored both in literature about the debate over

1 Terry Campbell and G.A. Rawlyk, "The Historical Framework of Newfoundland and Confederation", in Rawlyk, ed., *The Atlantic Provinces and the Problems of Confederation*. (St. John's, 1979), pp. 48-84 and David Alexander, "Development and Dependence in Newfoundland, 1880-1970", *Acadiensis*, IV, 1 (Autumn 1974), pp. 3-31.

2 Isabel Bescoby, "A Colonial Administration: An Analysis of Administration in British Columbia, 1869-1871", in J. Friesen and H.K. Ralston, eds., *Historical Essays on British Columbia* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 122-51 and R.A.J. McDonald, "Victoria, Vancouver and the Evolution of British Columbia's Economic System, 1886-1914", in Alan F.J. Artibise, ed., *Town and City: Aspects of Western Canadian Urban Development* (Regina, 1981), pp. 31-55.

Confederation³ and more recently in excellent studies of the regional economic and political consequences of national integration.⁴

Elizabeth W. McGahan looks at another aspect of this tension between coastal and continental influences on Canada's seaboard societies in *The Port of Saint John: From Confederation to Nationalization, 1867-1927. A Study in the Process of Integration* (Saint John, National Harbours Board, 1982). By examining the development of the port of Saint John, New Brunswick, during the period after the Maritime colonies had joined Confederation, she seeks to add a new dimension to what is now a well-established area in the historiography of Canada's Atlantic region. Two influences inform McGahan's approach. To the "ecological" model employed by Harold Innis in *A History of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (1923), which stresses the relationship between population, environment, technology, and organization, she adds the urban geographers' emphasis on central place. Working from the assumption that "the transportation node determined the primary functions of Saint John" (p. 14), McGahan refines the nodal approach by focusing on one crucial aspect of Saint John's urbanization process, the changing role of the port. The author develops three themes: Saint John's gradual integration into the Canadian urban system; the impact of this new connection on the spatial organization of Saint John; and the relative importance of local elites and outside agencies in facilitating and controlling port expansion.

The first theme starts with the decline of Saint John's function as a centre of trans-Atlantic trade in New Brunswick lumber and site for the construction of wooden sailing vessels. The growing presence of national agencies and institutions in the city is then traced, beginning with Saint John's emergence between 1879 and 1895 as Montreal's winter port. In this period Saint John established itself as a trans-shipment point for goods passing to and from Central Canada. Once an important part of Britain's trans-Atlantic colonial system, Saint John by 1895 had willingly become an economic appendage of Montreal. A series of decisions by outside agencies advanced the integration process: in 1876 the federal government's decision to lease the Ballast Wharf area of Saint John's main peninsula and the arrival of the Intercolonial Railway; in the mid-1880s Ottawa's role in facilitating the construction of a railway bridge over the Reversing Falls; in 1889 completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway's Short Line to a terminus in the westside Carleton district; starting in 1895, federal subsidies to steamship lines running from Saint John; and the 1911 agreement between the city, the federal government, and the CPR that committed the rail-

3 See titles listed in G.A. Rawlyk, "Introduction", in Rawlyk, eds., *Historical Essays on the Atlantic Provinces* (Toronto, 1967), p. 6.

4 T.W. Acheson, "The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880-1910", *Acadiensis*, 1, 2 (Spring 1972), pp. 3-28; Ernest R. Forbes, *The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919-1927: A Study in Canadian Regionalism* (Montreal, 1979); David Alexander, *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays in Canadian Political Economy*, (Toronto, 1983).

road company to expand its yard facilities and the federal government to build additional wharves. Creation in 1927 of a federally-appointed Harbour Commission to manage the entire port of Saint John effectively concluded the shift in power over port decision-making away from local elites, where it had originally resided after Confederation, to the Canadian government and national railways, especially the CPR.

Transformation of the scale and direction of commercial activity in Saint John significantly altered the spatial organization of the port. Initially, rail lines into Saint John converged on the city's eastside peninsula, thus reinforcing and expanding its pre-Confederation commercial heart. But the arrival of railways, steamships, and a federal government presence resulted in the development of the western peninsula, or Carleton district, into Saint John's new commercial and transportation centre. Terminus of the CPR's Short Line Railway and site of extensive federal government and railway investments in wharves and elevators, Carleton by 1895 had emerged as Saint John's new commercial core. Carleton's development and the relative decline of East Saint John thus symbolized the city's spatial reorientation in response to changes in transportation technology and trade. Five excellent maps dispersed throughout the book document the harbour's physical evolution.

Of particular interest to urban historians will be the book's final theme, the struggle for power over port affairs between Saint John's civic and business elites, and between the local elites and external agencies. The Board of Trade played a very active role in promoting the port's external functions. The Common Council, which controlled land use in the harbour area, also encouraged economic expansion by investing public money in port facilities and by using harbour-front lands to bonus private and government port initiatives. But in contrast to the Board of Trade, the Common Council was more concerned with the local implications of increased economic activity than with actually developing the export sector. Thus, while the Board of Trade in the mid-1880s strongly urged the federal government to support the construction of a new harbour bridge over the Reversing Falls, the Council, while sympathetic to the bridge proposal, wanted it located elsewhere to serve better the city's internal transportation needs. Conflict between the outward-looking business elite and inward-looking civic elite during the 19th century lessened in the 20th as both local groups increasingly lost control of port development to central Canadian railroads and the federal government.

McGahan's argument that leading Saint John business and political figures held discernibly different views about boosterism and the municipal government's economic role makes a significant contribution to our understanding of urban decision-making and merits the attention of other historians interested in exploring the contours of urban power. It also corrects the somewhat inaccurate notion, drawn from examples of new communities in the Canadian west, that urban boosters were unified in their view about how community interests should best be promoted.⁵ But these achievements are diminished somewhat by the

author's rather unsystematic use of the "elite" concept. Common Council and Board of Trade members are defined as Saint John's "civic" and "business" elites respectively, though the precise meaning of the latter term remains ambiguous. At the end of the book the "business elite" is defined narrowly to mean only the "officers and executive council" of the Board of Trade (p. 241), yet throughout the volume it is employed in a manner that implies the inclusion of all board members. One also wonders about defining a "business elite" to refer only to the leading members of the city's major commercial body. This narrow definition may overlook the influence of other top city entrepreneurs, such as manufacturers, on port development.

In addition, McGahan refers to Board of Trade influence on Council (p. 74) and to an overlap between the two elites (p. 15), but these assertions cannot be firmly established without fuller analysis of the two groups. A comparable study shows that Vancouver's city councillors, drawn mainly from small businessmen and real estate promoters, were much less likely to be concerned with issues of external commerce than were leading merchants in the Board of Trade.⁶ Similarly, businessmen in Birmingham, Alabama, were divided over the importance of local as opposed to regional or national issues.⁷ A prosopographical analysis of Board of Trade and Common Council members might have established a more complete social and economic explanation for the divergent interests and outlook of Saint John's elites.

Discussion of the functions of local elites and outside agents in directing port development touches one of the central themes of Canadian urban history, the inferiority of civic governments within the country's overall constitutional structure. The local state has at its disposal only limited means to direct urban growth. The municipal government's ability to control land utilization and to use civic taxation and borrowing authority for boosterist purposes were both employed by the Saint John Common Council to facilitate port expansion. Ultimately, however, even these limited powers could be, and were in Saint John, superceded by the powers of superior governments.

McGahan's principal explanation for the evolution of Saint John's harbour from local to national institution is to be found in the impact of new transportation technology. As she points out, "it is generally recognized that a significant correlation exists between the sophistication of a society's instruments of transportation technology and the organization of that society" (p. 14). Many Saint John boosters encouraged the transition, but in McGahan's interpretation they

5 The best example of this interpretation is to be found in work by Alan Artibise. See *Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth, 1874-1914* (Montreal, 1975) and "Continuity and Change: Elites and Prairie Urban Development, 1914-1950", in Artibise and G.A. Stelter, eds., *The Usable Urban Past* (Toronto, 1979), pp. 130-54.

6 Robert A.J. McDonald, "The Business Elite and Municipal Politics in Vancouver, 1886-1914", *Urban History Review*, XI, 3 (February, 1983), pp. 1-14.

7 Carl V. Harris, *Political Power in Birmingham, 1871-1921* (Knoxville, Tenn, 1977).

appear as agents of change secondary in importance to the larger scale of organization necessitated by new technology. The author's emphasis on technology is an intriguing one, but she has chosen more to state the idea than to explain the mechanism by which the relationship worked. For example, are we to assume that increasing outside control of the harbour was the product of continual changes and refinements in transportation technology, or did the major 19th-century innovations in the application of steam power to land and sea carriers merely take a long time to shape organizational patterns?

Studies of specific communities can illuminate larger historical questions by placing local phenomena in broader interpretive contexts. A comparative framework is crucial if community histories are to rise above the level of the particular. McGahan's work only partially succeeds in locating Saint John's development within the more intricate fabric of regional and urban history. The book makes clear that Saint John's integration into Canada's urban system was part of a larger process of relations between region and nation, but it does not fully explore the implications of the larger process for the history of the port. T.W. Acheson has shown that the National Policy generated considerable secondary manufacturing in the Maritimes in the 1880s and that Saint John was an important beneficiary of this economic expansion. The relationship between industrial growth and port expansion deserves closer attention:

Unfortunately, the book offers only very limited statistical data, such as figures on imports and exports, and these have been relegated to the footnotes. Tables describing the structural components of Saint John's economy are required if the scope of harbour development and the links between port-related commerce and other aspects of the city's economy are to be fully explored. In addition, although the author refers to changes in the city's occupational structure (pp. 15 and 79), she does not statistically demonstrate the relationship between harbour expansion and occupational change. Allan Pred's work on the relationship between industrialization and urban growth suggests another possible avenue of statistical enquiry for Saint John. McGahan refers to Pred's observation that heavy consumers of waterfront acreage were generally to be found on the harbour's periphery. But Pred's primary concern was to explore the linkages between types of economic development and stages of urban growth.⁸ One wonders if Pred's approach could have been employed to explain further the relationship between harbour development and the overall process of urbanization in Saint John.

Finally, the reader would also like to know more about the connection between Ottawa's increased control of the harbour, culminating in nationalization of the port, and the de-industrialization of the Maritimes. The 20th-century decline of the Maritimes into a staple-producing region stripped of its industrial potential and dependent on the metropolitan economy of Central Canada

8 Allen Pred, "Industrialization, Initial Advantage and American Metropolitan Growth", *Geographical Review*, LV (1965), pp. 158-185.

parallels the evolution of the port; were both changes part of the same historical process? Comparison of harbour development in Saint John with that in other leading North American ports would also have illustrated more clearly the specifically urban, as opposed to regional, dimension of Saint John's port development.

The Port of Saint John cannot be read quickly. It is a detailed study and at times the narrative is rather laboured and obscure. But in the end the book does reward its readers with numerous insights both about the relationship between region and nation on Canada's east coast and about the evolution of Canada's urban system. For this reason it provides a useful addition to the historical literature of Canada's Atlantic seaboard.

R.A.J. McDONALD

Sailortown: Theory and Method in Ordinary People's History

THE BOOK TO BE REVIEWED IS Judith Fingard's *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of eastern Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982). It is a significant book because it sharply poses the problem of the application of orthodox theory and method to the attempt to write the history of ordinary people. Ostensibly, there is no theory and method. Her people are sailors of the big wind-ships, and their crimps. The context, labelled sailortown, comprises the three 19th-century ports of Halifax, Saint John, and Quebec. Her sympathy for the sailors is declared. The utility of theory is evidently denied in relation to the seafarer: "His life and work do not readily conform to the models and theories favoured by social historians" (p. 3); but, willy-nilly, a structure of analysis is implicit in the determination of the material presented. And method is purportedly settled in the early assertion that the study is "Largely descriptive in nature" (p. 3). This appears to be true, but it mostly takes the form of instancing given in demonstration of the implicit analytical framework and in support of some statement closeby in the text. In history one cannot merely describe. Despite the formal position to the contrary in this book, description must remain secondary to explanation.

There can be little doubt that Judith Fingard has landed on an important group of ordinary people in the Canadian past, since the massive ebb and flow of sailors in and out of the eastern ports in the last century must have as surely shaped the contours of early Canadian society as the massive tides have the Fundy coastline. She has probably met her own target of making a "rescue" (p. 3) of sailors from obscurity, by placing them on the agenda of common Canadians who have been professionally examined. The simple act of selection of sailors and crimps as subjects of her work represents a quantum leap forward in the writing of Canadian and Quebec maritime history, when compared to the sterile elitist and sometimes technological focuses employed by most of the older