

# The First Generation of Canadians

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## REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

### The First Generation of Canadians

ANOTHER VOLUME OF THE *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (XIII) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) is always a welcome event for historians of Canada. This one, produced under the skilled guidance of that master practitioner, Ramsay Cook, takes an honoured place on the shelf because it chronicles the first generation of Canadians who came to maturity near the mid-19th century and lived out their adulthood during the first 40 years of Confederation. Of course, one can find exceptions to this generalization: the oldest of the 648 persons recorded in this volume, a Methodist minister, was already 58 in 1867; the youngest, a poet and writer, was not even born until nearly two decades after Confederation. Yet three-quarters of the entries in volume XIII came to maturity during an era of accelerating political and economic change that encompassed the achievement of responsible government, the repeal of the Corn Laws, the advent of Confederation, and the adoption of a National Policy. In multitudinous ways, people as diverse as Robert Grant Haliburton, John G. Bourinot, Oliver Mowat, Andrew G. Blair, James Hannay, Alexander Begg, Arthur Buies, William McDougall and Goldwin Smith wove their adult lives into the fabric of the new nation. Most of the people found here were officeholders, physicians, lawyers, educators, journalists, religious leaders or businessmen.

Perhaps most important of all, the people who lived in Canada from Confederation to the First World War witnessed an extraordinary transformation of their society wrought by industrial capitalism. For that reason this review will focus upon three categories of people whose biographies appear in this volume — manufacturers, spokesmen for the working class and those usually found at the margins of 19th century industrial transformation (women, blacks, aboriginals). Most of those selected exhibited an important connection with Atlantic Canada.

Some of 19th century Canada's most prominent industrialists can be found here. They include Andrew Allan, the famous shipowner, George A. Drummond, spokesman for Montreal's business community during the 1880s, and Toronto merchant Timothy Eaton, who left an estate of over five million dollars. One can find sketches of two Canadian industrial 'kings' — Ezra B. Eddy in matches and Andrew F. Gault in cotton.

Although no kings of comparable wealth reigned over the Atlantic region, one can learn about a number of merchant princes who became actively involved in the region's industrial development. For example, James Carmichael inherited his father's Pictou shipping business and pursued opportunities on land as well as sea, exporting lumber, leasing coal fields, and investing in iron, steel and glass manufactories. Scotland-born George G. Dustan arrived in Saint John with his family in 1863 and started up the region's sugar refining enterprise. Simon A. Fraser, son of a New Glasgow shipbuilder, made ship's knees in the 1870s and rose to become general manager of the Nova Scotia Steel & Coal Company in 1901. By then he was considered to be the province's leading metallurgical engineer. Harvey Graham, also born into a New Glasgow shipbuilding family, held a

succession of managerial positions in the glass and steel industry. Nor was Thomas E. Kenney, scion of one of the wealthiest merchant families in Halifax, with assets of one million dollars in 1870, an entrepreneurial laggard. When shipping profits dropped during the 1880s, he moved his capital into sugar refining and cotton manufacturing, ultimately directing the city's largest bank into investment opportunities across Canada before it was grabbed by central Canadian interests. (So much for the alleged distinction between fixed and circulating capital.) Nelson Rhodes of Amherst gained experience supervising construction projects in Boston before returning to his hometown and organizing his own firm. During the 1880s he rode a building boom all over the Maritimes. Under the protection of the National Policy, his company built and repaired railway rolling stock, employing, at its height, over 1,200 people. Certainly John Fitzwilliam Stairs was a stellar example of Atlantic Canadian industrial prowess. Joining the family firm as a full partner in 1869, he built up its ropeworks into the most extensive complex of its kind in Canada, serving both local and European markets. This business, in turn, provided capital for other ventures in steel and sugar refining. According to J.B. Cahill, Stairs became an "innovative, aggressively competitive, ...courageous, far-seeing, and optimistic" corporate financier (p. 982). Upon his death, central Canadian banks gained unchallenged control over the Atlantic region's finance.

Although the largest group of industrialists germinated in Nova Scotian soil, New Brunswick and Newfoundland also served as entrepreneurial nurseries. Born into pre-loyalist stock, New Brunswick's Thomas R. Jones had become one of the region's largest dry goods wholesalers by Confederation. In subsequent years he invested his profits in a rolling mill and promoted railways links to Montreal and Maine. James McAvity entered his father's Saint John hardware firm in 1854, transforming the brass foundry from custom-ordered piece work into Canada's largest specialty manufacturing business. After his brother took control of day-to-day operations in 1887, James sought out new manufacturing technologies. Saint John's John Hegan Parks, trained in civil engineering, first helped to build the Intercolonial Railway and then established one of the earliest steam-powered cotton mills in Canada. With the elimination of interprovincial trade barriers and the advent of National Policy tariff protection, Parks' firm soon dominated the Canadian market in quality yarns. Unfortunately, chronic shortages of working capital forced the business into the hands of the Montreal cotton combine at the turn of the century. August Harvey was born into a Bermuda family active in the Newfoundland trade. Starting out in the fishery supply business in St. John's, he diversified into lumbering, mining and manufacturing and became one of the province's most prominent industrialists.

Even the occasional Yankee entrepreneur found fame and fortune in Atlantic Canada. Born in Raymond, Maine, Thomas S. Simms served in the American Civil War and then used his veteran's bonus to start up a broom manufactory in Portland, Maine. While he was marketing his product in the Maritimes, two Saint John merchants persuaded him to relocate his business to the Fundy city where it thrives to this day.

In short, these portraits undermine Roy George's assertion that Nova Scotia

lacked entrepreneurial talent and reinforce the arguments of those who have linked the demise of industry in Atlantic Canada to a regional capital shortage.<sup>1</sup> Government transportation policies, also a likely culprit, necessarily remain hidden beneath the surface in a volume of this kind.

It is a truism that the industrialization of Canada elevated conflicts between labour and capital. More than in earlier volumes, this one chronicles the notable struggles of the first generation of class-conscious industrial workers through the biographies of their leaders. At the same time, the inclusion of a number of labour leaders from the Toronto-Montreal area and several others who emerged in Western Canada, raises questions regarding the notable absence of many from Atlantic Canada.

Irish-born Daniel J. O'Donoghue, the man dubbed 'the father' of the Canadian labour movement by Mackenzie King, emigrated with his family to Ottawa and entered the printer's trade. After a customary year-long tramp through printing shops in the United States, O'Donoghue returned to Canada and threw himself into the nascent labour movement, attending the founding meeting of the Canadian Labour Union during the early 1870s and becoming the first labour member of the Ontario legislature in 1874. Moving to Toronto six years later, O'Donoghue embraced the Knights of Labor and later helped to organize the Trades and Labour Congress. Thanks to his strong ties to the Grits, he was appointed Canada's first fair-wage officer in 1900. His biographers conclude that O'Donoghue helped gain recognition for labour "as an important component of Canadian society" (p. 781). Another Toronto printer, John Armstrong, worked in the composing room of the *Toronto Globe*. He was one of the 22 printers employed by the bitterly anti-union George Brown who were arrested on a charge of conspiracy in March, 1872. After Prime Minister John A. Macdonald trumped the Grit leader by repealing the old conspiracy law in favour of an act legalizing trade unions, Armstrong became a lifelong Tory. During the 1880s and 1890s he served in a number of trade-union leadership posts. Like O'Donoghue, he was co-opted by the politicians, first as labour member of the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labor and Capital in 1886 and later as secretary of Ontario's Bureau of Labour. Montreal's Joseph-Alphonse Rodier, also a printer and charter member of the city's Jacques Cartier local, helped form a labour party in Montreal which ultimately elected Alphonse Verville to the House of Commons in 1906. Such was Rodier's local prominence that the city's archbishop visited him on his deathbed and 2,000 workers marched at his funeral.

The biographies of no less than six western Canadian labour leaders appear in this volume. One of the most colourful, George Weston Wrigley, was a journalist and social reformer more than a leader of workers, and most of his career was played out in eastern Canada. Like some other (too few?) Christians in late 19th

1 On the lack of entrepreneurial talent, see Roy George, *A Leader and a Laggard: Manufacturing Industry in Nova Scotia, Quebec and Ontario* (Toronto, 1970); on capital shortages, see James D. Frost's M.A. thesis, "Principals of Interest: the Bank of Nova Scotia and the Industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880-1910", Queen's University, 1979.

century Canada, he struggled to reconcile the contradiction between the Gospel message and the unspeakable realities of life as regularly experienced by men, women and children in late Victorian workshops. Inspired by the Knights of Labor, Wrigley turned to journalism to promote social reform, becoming editor of the *Canadian Farmers' Sun* in the 1890s. "When the act of Confederation was adopted", Wrigley wrote,

it was supposed that Canada was being furnished with a proper form of government; that is, a government of the people, by the people, for the people. Instead of this we have a government of the people, by the representatives, for the classes who can pull strings. (p. 1113)

After a failed effort to link farm organizations with the nascent labour movement in Ontario, Wrigley moved to Vancouver and became an organizer for the American Labor Union (ALU), a radical American outfit then penetrating the region's mining towns.

Fuelled by the mining boom, British Columbia became a hot bed of simmering class consciousness and radical politics. James A. Baker, a miner, joined the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), a left-wing American miners' union. A member of the Socialist Labor Party of Canada (SLP), Baker traversed the western Canadian mining region, organizing striking miners into the WFM while preaching class struggle. Another radical, 20-year-old Frank Rogers, joined Vancouver's SLP in 1898, but then set up a splinter group that was more to his liking. When he was not running for office on the socialist ticket, he organized Japanese, European and native fishermen into a union and led them into an industry-wide strike which ultimately was broken up by the militia. Three years later Rogers was shot and killed during a CPR strike. His unsolved murder whipped the miners into a fury, undercutting the efforts of more moderate labour leaders like Chris Foley, who supported British-style independent labour political action. British-born Joseph H. Watson, a boilermaker, was a charter member of the international union of artisans in his trade. As a paid organizer for both the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC), he established about 40 new locals in the Vancouver region. Like Foley a Lib-Lab in politics, he supported Laurier's efforts to disengage the TLC from the AFL and make it an arm of the Grit party. When B.C. workers moved left instead, Watson's influence declined. Another British immigrant, Frank Sherman, brought Welsh coal mining experience to the Alberta-B.C. border. First joining the WFM, he left in 1903 to organize a district of the United Mine Workers which soon claimed a membership of 6,000. Sherman was one of those turn-of-the-century working-class leaders cultivated by Mackenzie King, then serving as deputy minister of the Department of Labour.

From these examples it is apparent that a vigorous labour movement had erupted by the turn of the century in central and western Canada. But what about Atlantic Canada? Does the absence of any deceased labour leaders from this region imply that its industrial workers were more 'conservative'? Of course not. First of all, industrial capitalist development unfolded in quite different ways and eras in each of the three regions of Canada. As Melvyn Dubofsky has observed, polarized

communities unique to the North American mining district tended to elevate labour-capital conflicts to classic Marxist levels.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, late 19th century central Canada exhibited an older, larger, more urbanized and differentiated stage of industrial capitalist development. In contrast, the more diffuse and limited industrialization of the Maritimes had occurred mostly after the adoption of the National Policy in 1879. Yet there is no question that many Atlantic Canadian workers had sufficient cause to become class-conscious. Don MacGillivray relates the moving story of Archibald Russell, a young Newfoundlander who had found work in the Cape Breton steel industry at the turn of the century. One day a block and tackle dropped from the rafters, instantly killing him. His father, just arrived from Newfoundland, stood waiting at the plant gate to embrace his son as the lifeless body was removed (pp. 913-14). Such accidents were not uncommon; where were the trade-union organizers to harness Atlantic Canadian workers' anger? In seeking answers to this question, we should remember that factory owners invariably held the upper hand. L. Anders Sandberg writes about a struggle between members of a trade union and Harvey Graham, the owner of a Nova Scotia glass factory, who resolved the dispute by closing the factory and then recruiting immigrant glass blowers to reassert his control. According to Bill Spray, Jabez Snowball, the Chatham, N.B. lumberman, was "a tough master with no sympathy for newly formed unions" (p. 977). An employer of 1,000 workers, he staved off two large strikes by dismissing 30 labour leaders. Moreover, an older, mercantile, patronage-based relationship between capital and labour persisted in some parts of Atlantic Canada. When Simon A. Fraser, general manager of Nova Scotia Steel & Coal Company and the son of the New Glasgow shipbuilder mentioned above, died at age 44 of overwork, 500 steelworkers accompanied his casket to the graveyard. And those labour leaders who did seek to promote union organization within the region received little encouragement or support from national and international unions. North American trade union leaders largely ignored requests from Atlantic Canadian workers for organizing assistance until AFL president Samuel Gompers finally dispatched John A. Flett in the fall of 1901. Even so, regional labour leaders did emerge during this period. At least one important figure — Michael Kelly of Saint John's powerful shiplabourers' society — does not appear in this volume although he lost his life in a waterfront accident during this decade. *Mea culpa*.

If the stories of business and labour leaders are interesting, those of Atlantic Canadian women, blacks and aboriginals are no less so. Many of the women appearing in this volume broke out of the 'separate spheres' confining them to household pursuits and made a mark as writers, educators, reformers, missionaries and health care workers. First the writers: while raising her own children, Margaret Dickie of Hantsport, Nova Scotia, wife of a mariner, kept a diary about her town, organized a school for the community's children, and dreamed of one day establishing a farm for her family in the fertile American Midwest. Her husband

2 Melvyn Dubofsky, "The Origins of Western Working Class Radicalism, 1890-1905", *Labor History*, 7 (1966), pp. 131-54.

died in the attempt, but the apparently undaunted Margaret returned to Nova Scotia, remarried, and worked briefly as a telegraph operator before moving once again to the United States. A native of the Annapolis Valley, Carrie Harris published romantic novels based on local characters. Elizabeth Frame, a spinster, taught in small communities and began writing biography as well as some fiction in the 1860s. Along the way she became acquainted with Boston's Francis Parkman. Four of her historical essays were presented (by a male reader!) to sessions of the Nova Scotia Historical Society. The granddaughter of loyalists from Maryland, Margaret Gill listened to family stories about the American Revolution and turned to poetry "to preserve the memory of the loyalists from oblivion" (p. 380). An Anglican P.E.I. pathbreaker, Elizabeth Lee Owen, revealed independence of mind early on when she chose to marry a Catholic. Owen wrote "vivid, revealing" articles for a local magazine on the social history of Charlottetown, paying particular attention to the contributions of women. Isabella Rogerson emigrated from northern Ireland to St. John's and later published two books of poems, about equally divided between Irish and Newfoundland subjects. Lydia Brooks of Labrador composed sketches of life in that region for a St. John's newspaper during the 1890s, painting a vivid picture of her childhood and family and the hardships associated with their seasonal migrations.

Four Atlantic Canadian women were involved in education. A New Hampshire native, Mary E. Graves came to Acadia College in 1879 to head a preparatory school for young women. The school prospered and some of her students continued their studies at the college. Mary Mellish Archibald graduated from Mount Allison and then taught mathematics and natural science there during the early 1870s, before marrying. Finding herself widowed with an eight-year-old youngster, she returned to Mount Allison and ultimately became vice-principal of that institution. John Reid concludes that Archibald successfully reshaped her own life in widowhood and also helped younger women to take control of theirs. In Halifax, Mary Ann Maguire was one of the first pupils in a school opened by the New York-based Catholic Sisters of Charity in 1849. Taking the habit, Maguire went on to become mother superior of the order, charged with overseeing several schools, an orphanage and, most importantly, Mount Saint Vincent College. Her advocacy of the latter resulted in a long, bitter struggle with the local archbishop, who believed that the Sisters of Charity ought to care for the indigent rather than to train teachers. Another Nova Scotian educator, Lucy Rogers Butler, opened a nursery school in Yarmouth after being widowed, at 35, with two small children. This, in turn, led to an invitation from Halifax to superintend an orphanage.

The remaining six Atlantic Canadian women included in the volume under review took widely varying paths. Two Saint John women became social reformers. Jennie Phelan Hutchinson was instrumental in the establishment of provincial branches both of the King's Daughters and Sons and of the Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association. According to Elspeth Tulloch, the latter was the "first and only provincially-oriented society to dedicate itself exclusively to the cause of women's enfranchisement" (p. 496). The other, Frances Murray, a skilled platform speaker, led both the New Brunswick SPCA and the local unit of the National Council of Women.

Another two women from the Maritimes dedicated their lives to church work. Mary Lamont graduated from the seminary at Grand Pré and departed from Canada in 1874 to carry out mission work in India. Suffering from ill health during much of her career, she died there in 1903. The parents of Charlotte Geddie of Prince Edward Island were involved in missionary work in the New Hebrides. At a tender age Charlotte was dispatched to the United Kingdom for schooling. Returning as a teenager to the Pacific islands eight years later, she did not recognize her parents and met her younger brother for the first time. Still later, returning to Nova Scotia for additional study, she married a Halifax merchant and continued to be involved in church work.

Two women from the region devoted their lives to nursing. Sarah Forbes, born in Liverpool in 1860, trained for nursing in Washington, D.C. and served two stints overseas during the South African war. Amanda Viger, a Quebec native, joined the Religious Hospitallers of St. Joseph at age 15 and came to Tracadie, New Brunswick in 1868 to treat leprosy patients. During her 34 years there she built a hospital, orphanage and pharmacy, hoping to find a remedy for the disease.

What do these biographies reveal about the pattern of Atlantic Canadian women's lives during the late 19th century? A few, notably the social reformers, stepped outside the traditional 19th century spheres of home, family and church, but most of them did not do so for very long. No doubt the writers more easily combined family duties with intellectual activities. Those who remained unmarried pursued gender-defined careers in teaching or nursing; widows found themselves driven by necessity to take up careers they had abandoned upon marriage, or to pursue new ones.

Among the remaining marginalized people, four blacks from Atlantic Canada merit attention. The ancestors of Abraham Walker, a Saint John lawyer and journalist, had settled on the Kingston peninsula in 1786. After receiving training in law in Washington, D.C., Walker articulated in a Saint John law office and was called to the bar in 1882, thereby becoming the first African-Canadian lawyer. Three years later he ran head-on into the colour line: the city law society barred him from a banquet commemorating the centenary of the provincial bar, and lack of legal work ultimately forced Walker into stenographic work. Another talented black, Peter McKerrow, arrived in Halifax from the West Indies and joined his father-in-law in a hat, cap and fur business. A pillar of the African Baptist church, he became the first African-Canadian historian in 1895, when he published a history of the black Baptists in Nova Scotia. Two other Atlantic Canadian blacks, George "Old Chocolate" Godfrey and George "Little Chocolate" Dixon, became famous boxers in the United States. Old Chocolate, born in the Bog in Charlottetown in 1852, moved to Boston and worked as a porter, playing baseball and taking boxing lessons on the side. Between 1880 and 1896 he fought an estimated 100 bouts and became the first black heavyweight champion in the United States during the mid-1880s. America's famed John L. Sullivan hid behind the U.S. colour line, adamantly refusing to fight Godfrey, who ran a gym and boxing school in Boston until his death in 1901. Little Chocolate, born in Halifax, started out as a photographer's apprentice and met boxers who had come to the studio to pose for publicity shots. Moving to Boston, the diminutive 120-pound



Dixon fought a 70-round draw with the eastern U.S. bantam champion on his way to becoming the first black and the first Canadian to win a world boxing title. Another Halifax-born black, John Kellum, lived longer than the two Chocolates but scored no knockouts in the ring of life. Kellum was jailed nearly a hundred times during the last half of the 19th century, mostly for drunkenness, vagrancy, or theft. For him, Judith Fingard notes, jail was part of a survival strategy:

In return for their bed and board during the difficult winter months, the male members of the (black) family exercised their skills as whitewashers on city property (p.540).

Although two aboriginals from outside Atlantic Canada — Gabriel Dumont, the Metis warrior, and Oronhyatekha, the Mohawk physician and leader of a large North American fraternal order — eclipse the others in fame, a Micmac and two Maliseets from the Atlantic region reveal the struggles of native peoples marginalized by the dominant white society. Born in 1841 on the Mirimichi, Thomas Barnaby became a Micmac chief during the 1880s and tried to help his people cope with the evils of alcohol. Gabriel Acquin, a Maliseet, guided British officers on hunting trips, thereby also becoming acquainted with two New Brunswick lieutenant-governors. In 1860 he was chosen to give the visiting Prince of Wales a ride in a canoe across the St. John River. Invited by the prince to London, Acquin arrived in a beaded outfit with his canoe and wigwam. He settled near the ponds of South Kensington, renewing old friendships with royalty and officers, and became “the greatest social lion of the day” (p. 4). Noel Bear, a Maliseet hunter, trapper, guide and basketmaker, born in Maine, supplied moose to the garrison at Ft. Fairfield during the Aroostook War. When the U.S. government failed to recognize his tribe as treaty Indians, his family moved to New Brunswick. His ability to survive in the woods throughout the harsh winters awed even fellow tribesmen. But new game laws, enacted at the behest of sportsmen’s clubs during the 1870s and 1880s, undermined his way of life, forcing him into basketry. Noel Bear died alone in the woods in 1907, at perhaps 100 years or more in age.

No reader of this volume of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, or any volume for that matter, should expect to uncover a new historiographical paradigm which will reinterpret the Canadian past. Yet between the lines of these 600-odd biographies one catches occasional glimpses of the breakup of the old socio-economic order and the rise of a new one taking place in a young nation experiencing the ‘modernizing’ forces of industrial capitalism. For some the changes spelled opportunities, including higher status, greater influence and enhanced mobility. Most of the lives chronicled here are about the politicians, businessmen and intellectuals who could take advantage of modernization, if not at their birthplace, perhaps somewhere else in Canada or in the United States. But we must remember that most of those who experienced the downside of industrial capitalist development still remain buried in obscurity, their struggles only hinted at in this volume by the lives of wives and widows, or working-class leaders, or by the death of an ancient aboriginal in the New Brunswick forest.

ROBERT H. BABCOCK