

Public History and the *People's History*: A View from Atlantic Canada

David Frank

Volume 32, Number 2, Spring 2003

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad32_2re02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Frank, D. (2003). Public History and the *People's History*:: A View from Atlantic Canada. *Acadiensis*, 32(2), 120–133.

Public History and the *People's History*: A View from Atlantic Canada

IT IS SEVERAL YEARS NOW SINCE those Sunday evenings at the dawn of the new century when Canadians gathered around their television screens to watch the unveiling of their multi-million dollar millennium gift. It came in the form of a sustained, full-dress presentation of Canadian history, as prepared by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Radio Canada to celebrate the arrival of the new millennium. By the time the second season was completed in 2002, 17 separate episodes had been broadcast, filling a total of 30 hours of primetime television. The cost of the series was about \$25 million, an unprecedented expenditure for the popularization of Canadian history on film – though hardly an extraordinary amount in an international industry where the same budget can be assembled for the production of a single feature film. The audience numbers were remarkable too, clocking in at more than two million viewers for the first episode.¹ It was a surprise to the advertising industry, as numerous sponsors had passed over the opportunity to support the series, their marketing departments claiming that there was no consumer appetite for Canadian history on this scale.² In a country where the public sector had been under attack for years on end, *Canada: A People's History* was a triumph for public broadcasting. Executive producer Mark Starowicz later wrote that the evening of the first broadcast on 22 October 2000 was the moment when “the myth that Canadians are not interested in their history died a well-deserved death”.³ Even if it was true that Canadians did not know much about their history, as various polls had been telling them for years, it seemed clear that Canadians were interested and wanted to know more about it. If public history is primarily about audience, then the *People's History* was a successful exercise in public history.

That experience of a shared viewing of Canadian history delivered on one of the central promises of the new visual technology of the 20th century. As Walter Benjamin had observed in the 1930s, the new technology of communication embedded in the film industry made it possible for large numbers of people to share almost simultaneously in the viewing of a cultural production. Like the great epics of the age of oral tradition, he suggested, the motion picture, with its processes of collective production and shared reception, had the potential to become the appropriate form of public art for modern times.⁴ More than one cultural critic has endorsed the idea that film did indeed become one of the international languages of the 20th-century.⁵ At the onset of the 21st-century the success of the *People's History*

1 Gene Allen, “The Professionals and the Public: Responses to *Canada: A People's History*”, *Histoire sociale/Social History*, XXXIV, no. 68 (novembre/November 2001), pp. 381-91.

2 Linda McQuaig, “Just 1 sponsor, but Cdns love CBC *People's History*”, 21 December 2000, <http://www.straightgoods.com>

3 “Afterword by Mark Starowicz”, in Don Gillmor, Achille Michaud and Pierre Turgeon, *Canada: A People's History, Volume Two* (Toronto, 2001), p. 323.

4 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York, 1968), pp. 219-53.

5 For a recent comment, see, for instance, Simon Schama, “Clio at the Multiplex: What Hollywood and Herodotus have in common”, *New Yorker*, 19 January 1998, pp. 38-45. For an earlier review article in these pages, see David Frank, “One Hundred Years After: Film and History in Atlantic Canada”, *Acadiensis*, XXVI, 2 (Spring 1997), pp. 112-36.

David Frank, “Public History and the *People's History*: A View from Atlantic Canada”, *Acadiensis*, XXXII, 2 (Spring 2003), pp. 120-133.

in reaching an audience seemed especially impressive, as broadcast audiences were fragmented by the multiplication of channels and the arrival of home video. The audience numbers for the second series undoubtedly fell off from the peaks of the first year, aggravated by the blanket media coverage of 11 September 2001 and, perhaps, the increasingly journalistic flavour of the later episodes. The initial broadcasts have been followed by repeat presentations and video sales. There is also a teacher resource package, although it is unfortunate, even astonishing, that the price for the full series charged to educational institutions – more than \$2,000 – places it beyond the reach of most school collections. Meanwhile the ancillary web-sites, with their quizzes and questions and reading lists, continue to be available. A handsome two-volume companion book has sold well, and Starowicz himself has written an insider's account of the making of the series.⁶ In short, the *People's History* has now entered history itself as a contribution to the making of Canadian history on film.

The success of the *People's History* depended not only on the public appetite for Canadian history, but also on the production values of the project. A team of experienced cinematographers focused on the sweep and beauty of the country's physical geography as well as the detail of local settings and situations. Set and costume designers worked to recreate the physical and material detail of the past. Researchers delved into museums and archives to find the artefacts, documents, photographs and illustrations that occupy a central place in the visual narrative, and for 20th-century events, editors reviewed collections of film and television footage. Similarly, writers worked their way through old texts and recent publications in search of excerpts for first-person re-enactments. Computer designers enhanced the visual materials, sound technicians punctuated the story with incidental effects and musicians performed a symphonic soundtrack (also available on CD). The editing was accomplished with superb professional calculation, frame to frame and sequence to sequence. The essential narrative structure was one common enough in print, radio or television journalism. Each major episode was divided into a series of short stories or sub-episodes of five to ten minutes that brought a particular situation into close view. It is possible to think of these separate "moments" as extended versions of the well-known Heritage Minutes of the 1990s, except that in this case the key was to make them work together as part of a larger dramatic structure. Themes are visited and revisited and situations are explored through the accumulation of visual and dramatic detail. Unlike many historical documentaries, there are no latter-day historical experts on the screen to provide a critical perspective on the evidence (or even debate with each other), yet the decision to avoid such interruptions was consistent with the purpose of highlighting contemporary evidence and maintaining a classic dramatic unity. Despite the implied flattery to historical experts, the talking head in documentaries is usually an indication of a low budget. In lieu of experts, the series features a strong narrative voice that runs through the series from start to finish; in the English version Maggie Huculak appears on screen as a live person reading a studio

6 For the home of the *People's History*, see <http://history.cbc.ca/> See also Don Gillmor and Pierre Turgeon, *Canada: A People's History, Volume One* (Toronto, 2000), Don Gillmor, Achille Michaud and Pierre Turgeon, *Canada: A People's History, Volume Two* (Toronto, 2001) and Mark Starowicz, *Making History: The Remarkable Story Behind Canada: A People's History* (Toronto, 2003).

script only in the final frames of the last episode of the second series. Her appearance confirms the self-evident truth that the *People's History* was indeed the product of a construction of history by a behind-the-scenes team of television professionals who made use of many skills and talents appropriate to the presentation of history for the television age.

One interesting effort to examine the *People's History* was undertaken by students at Carleton University as part of a practicum in applied history supervised by Professor Del Muise. They reviewed press and media coverage, studied the resources available on the *People's History* web-site, sampled the e-mail communications received by the CBC and conducted their own survey of responses from the academic, archival and museum communities. The results are discussed on a well-designed web-site that summarizes their findings in each area and provides links to other sites. For instance, they found that media coverage was fairly intensive during the weeks surrounding the launch, including a series of arguments for a more accessible history in *The Globe and Mail* under the title "The Death of History". Following the Sunday evening broadcasts, the *National Post* published a series of Monday morning reviews by their favoured historical experts. More general assessments were also available, as columnist Rick Salutin in the *Globe* complained that the series was not really a populist history ("The Cleanest History Ever Told") and Robert Fulford in the *Post* objected that there was too much attention to minorities ("To the Losers go the Spoils"). By the end of the first series of nine episodes, however, media coverage had waned significantly. This student project did not cover the second series of the *People's History* in the 2001-02 season. Nonetheless, it remains a valuable introduction that demonstrates the opportunities for interactive dialogue and critical perspective in responding to the presentation of history on film.⁷

The most relevant academic discussion to date has appeared in the pages of the journal *Histoire sociale/Social History*, whose editors sponsored a roundtable session at the meetings of the Canadian Historical Association in Quebec City in the spring of 2001 under the title "*Canada: A People's History: The Historian's Perspective*". Historians from the Atlantic Region (Margaret Conrad) and Quebec (Patrice Groulx) were asked to address three related questions: "Which history was offered by the series? What is the contribution of the series to Canadian history? What is the series' potential as a means of civic education?"⁸ Their answers were mixed and prompted a response from Gene Allen, research director for the series (and a veteran of CBC Current Affairs with a Ph.D. in Canadian history – on the history of the Intercolonial Railway no less). Allen rejected the allegation that the *People's History* was a form of official history with a mandate to promote national unity – "une affaire de Sheila Copps" – and explained instead that it originated as an independent project of the public broadcasters. In a more extended published discussion, Allen explored the gap

7 See <http://www.carleton.ca/historycollaborative/> The following year another group of students, with the participation of Professors Muise and Ian McKay, Queen's University, conducted a class symposium on the series. A transcript of the discussion on 3 April 2002 is available at the website for the Carleton Centre for Public History at <http://www.carleton.ca/ccph/peopleshistorysymposium.htm>

8 Margaret Conrad, "My Canada Includes the Atlantic Provinces" and Patrice Groulx, "La meilleure histoire du monde", *Histoire sociale/Social History*, XXXIV, no. 68 (novembre/November 2001), pp. 392-402, 403-14.

between professional and public history as demonstrated in responses to the series. In doing so he provided a useful statement of the film-makers' original objectives. One of them was to make Canadian history interesting enough to reach "a large, nonspecialized audience of Canadian television viewers", and the other was to present "a version of Canada's past that would be recognized as credible, balanced, and reasonably complete".⁹

Conrad's principal observation in that discussion was that "in the rare instances in which the series focuses on Atlantic Canada, it does so with a fuzzy lens". As a result, she concluded, "references to the region lack context and are often so compressed that they do the region an injustice". Conrad ably identified a series of weaknesses and missed opportunities. In Episode 2, for instance, there was no mention of European settlement at Ste. Croix Island (1604) or Port Royal (1605) and Champlain did not appear at all until several years later at Quebec City (1608). In subsequent episodes, the Acadians were shown to be victims of British policy, but there was no satisfactory representation of their own activities, ambitions and alliances within the context of 17th and 18th century imperial rivalries. The pre-Loyalist Planters were ignored, and the impact of the Loyalists on the region understated and oversimplified. Prince Edward Island was not mentioned until Episode 8. By the time of Confederation, the treatment was predictably centralist in respect to the making of the new Dominion. In the process a great deal of the new social history of the 19th century was neglected, notably the variety of internal developments and social conflicts in British North America that were opening the way for urbanization, industrialization and other trends that characterized the age of progress and led towards the political integration of territory. Conrad concluded with little optimism about the prospects for increased attention to the Atlantic Region in the second half of the series. In its own way, the series seemed to have demonstrated "the widely perceived irrelevance of the Atlantic region to Canada at the dawn of the twenty-first century".¹⁰

The post-Confederation narrative, starting with Episode 10, certainly begins on a triumphalist note: a locomotive steams towards the viewer, the music rises, the titles roll and the narrator announces that we are viewing "the first history of Canada for the television age". It is worth quoting the preface at length here, for it conveys a sense of the nation-building imperative that runs through the second series as a whole:

It is a story which has seen a vast continent of First Nations become a battlefield of rival empires whose descendants would forge a new country, a country which will become the shores of hope for millions.

All the events portrayed in this series actually happened, all the people you see actually lived, all the words they speak were spoken or written by them.

This is the story of one of the great human migrations in history, of the landless and the dispossessed, driven by hunger and by hope to a turbulent adventure in a landscape of terrifying beauty. This is the story of how their

9 Gene Allen, "The Professionals and the Public", pp. 381-91.

10 Conrad, "My Canada Includes the Atlantic Provinces", p. 398 *et passim*.

children will return to the old world and in the crucible of war take their place among nations . . .

It is a story of dreamers and prophets, reformers and revolutionaries, of ordinary people facing physical calamity, economic collapse and political persecution. It's the story of the lust for gold, the battle for human dignity and for the shaping of a new century, a new century in which Quebeckers will ask if they have a place in Canada, and two champions will emerge who will transform the country.

There seems no doubt from such language that the *People's History* is intended as a celebration of Canadian achievement. If there is an implied viewer, it seems to be the patriotic Canadian citizen seeking an historical explanation of the country's success in creating a society of tolerance, security and opportunity that, to paraphrase the Prime Minister's frequent boast, is the envy of the world. There is an equivalent summary statement at the beginning of each of the post-Confederation episodes. Historians will note as well that this preface takes care to underline the authenticity of the series, explicitly spelling out for the benefit of viewers accustomed to fictionalizations of history on film the idea that the documentary is an authoritative version of eyewitness history.

As the titles are completed, we begin with Episode 10 proper, "Taking the West". There is another introductory statement, this one with the real ring of textbook cliché: the conquest of the West was "a human drama which begins 120 years ago when the west was still young and the Indian nations controlled the great frontier". Despite this note of metropolitan ethno-centricity, the episode goes on to provide a reasonably effective narrative of the Canadianization of the west as a central theme in the post-Confederation narrative. It is shown as a story of the state policies of expansion, negotiation and coercion that opened the way for the influx of white settlers and dispossession of the First Nations. Treatments of the treaty negotiations in the 1870s are sympathetic to the dilemmas facing the Cree and the point of view that their country was being reduced to "pieces of pemmican"; there is no mistaking the duplicity of the Canadian state in enacting its own Indian Act while also engaged in negotiations with the First Nations. The Northwest Rebellion receives a full treatment in which the attitudes of Crowfoot, Poundmaker and Big Bear are at least as important as those of Gabriel Dumont and Louis Riel; moreover, the lesser known Will Jackson, the former University of Toronto student who went west and became a supporter of Riel, comes into his own as another representative of the democratic tradition in the West. Nonetheless, the film leaves no doubt of the significance of the military expedition into the west by what is called Canada's "first national army". Episode 10 culminates not only in the hanging of Riel and eight aboriginal men but also in the completion of the railway and Macdonald's cross-Canada tour by rail the following year. In that moment of triumph it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the Canadian state had succeeded in overthrowing the pre-existing civilization of the west, not to mention the stated conclusion that the rebellion itself could have been avoided.

There are at least two short caveats to be noted regarding this treatment of the 1870s and 1880s, for both seem to indicate an indifference to contemporary historiography on the period. A short treatment of child labour and urban poverty in

the cities of the east is too easily associated with the depressed conditions of the 1870s rather than the rise of industrial capitalism in general in this era; moreover, it is implied that the Canadian West became a kind of safety valve for urban discontent, although there is little evidence that impoverished urban working-class families were in the vanguard of the homesteaders. The fact that this was also the moment when an organized labour movement emerged in the east passes without comment. Viewers will hear nothing of the Trade Union Act (1872), Ontario's Canadian Labour Union (1873) or Nova Scotia's Provincial Workmen's Association (1879) or the activities of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada and the Knights of Labour in the 1880s. The exclusion of this formative moment in the working-class response to industrial capitalism is a remarkable omission, but it is not the only one. The episode also contains not a single mention of the Maritimes or Newfoundland. This is perhaps unsurprising, except that it would have been easy to do so as there was some attention to the emigration of Quebec working-class families to the New England mills where they formed the famous "little Canadas". This was an opportunity to examine the exodus of population from the Maritimes as well during this era and at least introduce the themes of urbanization and industrialization that were transforming the Maritimes at an unprecedented rate and, under the aegis of the National Policy, assisting in the integration of the region into national markets in labour, goods and capital.

The emergence of the West as a distinct society within Confederation obviously required separate treatment as a chapter in the formation of the Canadian state. However, the Atlantic Region receives no equivalent treatment at any place in the second series. From a regional perspective this is undoubtedly the most notable failure of the post-Confederation narrative. The viewer is left with the impression that a number of things happened in the east, mainly along the lines of victimization (boys in mines), disaster (Halifax Explosion), restructuring (Newfoundland and Confederation) and failure (outmigration). But there is no sustained treatment of the Canadianization of the region as an integral part of the Canadian story. This shortcoming was predictable enough in the textbooks of a generation ago, but one had hoped that this kind of treatment had been superseded by a new historiography.¹¹ Indeed, it is now possible to advance at least a dozen amply documented historical generalizations regarding regional history in the post-Confederation era that illustrate the ways the region shared and resisted the Canadian experience. These have included conclusions regarding the golden age of merchant capital in the age of sail, the uneven transformation of the countryside, the internal redistribution and exodus of population, the conditions and opportunities for local industry, the cyclical dependencies of the modern resource economy, the struggle for the recognition of regional objectives within national policies, the fate of community-based entrepreneurship in the age of concentration and centralization, the progressive activism of early female reformers, the agitation for Maritime Rights as an instance of regional mobilization, the struggles on behalf of underclasses and minorities against

11 For a selection of comments on the development of the field, see "Back to the Future: The New History of Atlantic Canada", *Acadiensis*, XXX, 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 3-91. For the recent regional surveys, see E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muike, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Fredericton/Toronto, 1993) and Margaret Conrad and James Hiller, *Atlantic Canada: A Region in the Making* (Don Mills, 2001).

exploitation and marginalization, the search for socialist, cooperative and regionalist alternatives, the emergence of new dependencies in the age of the welfare state and even the making of a regional culture that has oscillated between progressive, anti-modernist and communitarian images. Obviously there is much more, and it is perhaps foolish to attempt a summation – except that it seems necessary to do so in order to demonstrate that a sustained regional narrative was not only possible but that it could help explain that the ongoing struggle to define the Canadian identity was also taking place on the eastern front. Unfortunately, there is little in the second half of the *People's History* to revise Frank Underhill's long-discredited verdict of dismissal, which apparently is still in need of regular reiteration: "As for the Maritime provinces, nothing, of course, ever happens down there".¹²

By the beginning of Episode 11 ("The Great Transformation"), at least one Maritime connection has appeared, though in a remote and unrecognized disguise; although Tappan Adney is identified as an American magazine writer in the Klondike, his connections ran back to New Brunswick as well, where he was about to marry the daughter of an apple industry agriculturalist and become a defender of the rights of Maliseet and Mi'kmaq in the Maritimes; later his spouse Minnie Bell Adney would become the first woman to run for the House of Commons in a by-election in 1919. Nonetheless it is in Episode 11 that the Maritimes receive their first substantive treatment, in a sub-chapter entitled "The Mines & the Minds". It is worth pausing on this sub-chapter for several reasons, as it had the benefit of some appropriate historical advice and assistance but nonetheless resulted in a treatment that that suffers from a number of errors and inadequacies.¹³

12 Frank Underhill, *The Image of Confederation* (Toronto, 1964), p. 63. Underhill's comment was especially unfortunate, as it was made in the context of a lament for the failure of the regions and underclasses to mount an effective challenge to the domination of public policy by the Canadian ruling class. As Ernest Forbes has long since demonstrated, the integration of the Maritimes into Confederation ultimately led to the invention of a catalogue of Maritime stereotypes that have proven surprisingly durable (a theme that would no doubt be an apt subject for an innovative film treatment itself). See E.R. Forbes, "In Search of a Post-Confederation Maritime Historiography", in Forbes, *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton, 1989), pp. 48-66.

13 In the interests of disclosure, the reviewer must report that he was involved in the project at a tertiary level as one of the many uncredited historians who responded to requests and gave free advice during the course of the production. For the episode dealing with the 1870s and 1880s, I was asked to identify an appropriate story concerning the industrialization of the Maritimes; I suggested they explore the experience of Milltown, New Brunswick in the 1880s, which had been ably analyzed by Peter DeLottinville in a published article and in his Dalhousie University M.A. thesis, as it demonstrated the tensions arising from the impact of the industrial revolution in a small community in the region. The producer took a particular interest in the story of a young man who was induced by an undercover detective to set fire to the cotton mill. Research and preparation advanced some distance, and I expected to see a short treatment in Episode 10. I had a little more success with the request to identify a young coal miner who could represent the story of the coal miners in the early 20th century; my suggestion of Tius Tutty was based on the fact that his oral testimony had appeared in *Cape Breton's Magazine*, along with a photograph of him among a group of young men and boys preparing for work in the pit. In this case an experienced local researcher was hired in Cape Breton, who interviewed descendants and located more information. As indicated in my discussion of the resulting segment, the treatment failed to do justice to the opportunity. Finally, in connection with a later episode, one of the producers asked for my view on the most important development in Canadian labour history in

It begins with the cry of gulls on the shore of Cape Breton Island and the statement that this is a place where Gaelic “is still more common than English or French” at the turn of the century. This observation, questionable in respect to the relative ethnic diversity of the industrial community in the early 20th century, situates the coal industry as the site of an encounter between tradition and modernity in an age of progress that has not yet been mentioned in connection with the Maritimes. The significance of the coal industry as a source of supply for the Canadian energy market is implied, and the early 20th century is presented as the beginning of a new era when the engines of progress are stoked in underground coal mines in and around places like “the new city of Glace Bay”. The town mayor – Glace Bay never did become a city – David Burchell is quoted on the prospects for “good wages” and “good order”, although without reference to the fact that he was a company official soon to be superceded by local middle-class and working-class leaders. Attention turns next to the story of the 14-year-old Tius Tutty, the first in five generations of local fishermen to enter the mines, in this case after the death at sea of his father. Tutty represents an important theme in the formation of the local working class, and his story has been documented through oral history and subsequent research. His words are spoken, briefly and fatalistically, on the injuries he sustained working in the pit and the reasons he went into the mines in the first place: “I’ve got to make a living and there’s no other place to go. I said, ‘I’m not a coward. If I die down there, well I’ll die down there’”. Meanwhile we are viewing scenes of the industrial landscape and the faces of young workers and hearing about the “dismal and unhappy existence” of the miners, subject to long hours and constant danger. As we turn to an inspection of a paysheet from Dominion Coal’s 1-B colliery, we are told that the company “controls almost every aspect of a miner’s life”, and by the time the company store is finished with him, Tius can take home as little as 70 cents at the end of the month. The brief photographic treatment of the paysheet is somewhat misleading because it refers to a later historical moment (1-B colliery did not open until 1924). This is not a simple anachronism, however. The check-off sheet discloses such items as the doctor and the hospital, reminders of the fact that in the early years of the century local union and community activists had succeeded in establishing one of the first pre-paid medical care and hospital plans in Canada. As for the inclusion of the United Mine Workers on the check-off, this is unfortunate, for the UMW did not receive union recognition (or the check-off) until 1919; during the period represented in Episode 11 the coal companies favoured a different union and spent a good deal of time and effort blacklisting UMW leaders, issuing injunctions, evicting families from their homes and calling in troops – all for the purpose of maintaining “good order” in the coalfield. When the coal companies brought in strikebreakers and installed electric fences around their premises, the stage was set for one of the classic labour conflicts in

the post-1956 period. My suggestion was that the emergence of public sector unionism was of greatest historical significance in changing the place of the worker in Canadian society. I suggested that an account of the 1965 postal strike (which contributed to the recognition of public sector unionism) or of the life of Grace Hartman (the first woman to lead a major union in Canada, the Canadian Union of Public Employees) would be appropriate. On an admittedly self-interested note, I can report as well that although one of the producers read my 1999 biography of J.B. McLachlan with enthusiasm and we discussed potential treatments, this story also failed to make the cut.

Canadian history. While it is understandable that the film-makers would want to place the story of a boy miner front and centre in this segment, it should also be kept in mind that these young miners (including Tutty) played their part in the establishment of a tradition of labour unionism and political action which helped change the balance of power between labour and capital in 20th-century Canada. Returning to the surface, however, the age of progress takes on a more benign appearance as we visit briefly with Guglielmo Marconi's wireless station at Table Head and Alexander Graham Bell's airborne experiments at Baddeck. Thus the age of progress is shown to have its dark side below the surface in the coal mines, but modernity flourishes more successfully above ground on the open airways of radio and flight. The treatment in this segment firmly associates the coal miners with the worst excesses of the industrial revolution and allows little room for working-class agency. As in most coal-mining films, the stereotypes of victimization, powerlessness and inevitability remain relatively unimpaired.¹⁴

And so it continues. Considered as a film treatment of the Great War, Episode 12 ("Ordeal by Fire") is a largely effective evocation of that tragedy. As in the previous episode, we are now in a period when it is possible to make use of contemporary film footage. Here we see not only the predictable recruitment and propaganda films but also some difficult and shocking front-line footage that has not been used by previous film-makers. In respect to the Maritimes, there are brief references to the No. 2 Construction Battalion that enlisted Black recruits and to the war service of the Nova Scotia nurse Clare Gass (and her four brothers). While heroic reenactments were shown to home audiences, the Battle of the Somme was producing devastation, including the near annihilation of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment on 1 July 1916. There is a second sub-chapter of regional interest entitled "City of Sorrow", which focuses on the Halifax Explosion of 6 December 1917, the unique moment when a Canadian city experienced its share of wartime destruction. It is a concise and sombre recounting of the event that quotes personal accounts and shows photographic evidence and occasional footage of the impact of war on a civilian population in what is described as the world's "biggest man-made explosion in history until Hiroshima". After this the region largely disappears from the story. For instance, the labour unrest that began in 1916 and 1917 and continued across Canada into the 1920s is treated simply as a story of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, without reference to the new historiography that places Winnipeg events in the context of local manifestations of the same issues from St. John's to Victoria. Besides labour unrest there was also regional protest, and Maritime historians will be dismayed by the lack of reference to the Maritime Rights campaigns in either this episode or the sequel, Episode 13 ("Hard Times"). While the 1920s are represented as a time of "unparalleled wealth" for Canada, this was hardly the case in the Maritime Provinces, where Maritime Rights represented a progressive (though hardly separatist) critique of the legacy of Confederation and its version of national development. The damage is not undone in the 1930s either, when reformers such as Jimmy Tompkins and Moses Coady fail to make an appearance to articulate their vision of economic democracy; the same is the

14 My thanks to Heidi Coombs, Daniel MacDonald and Lorna Williams for sharing in a class discussion of this segment.

case for the labour radicals such as J.B. McLachlan, George MacEachern and Clarie Gillis. The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation is yet again (incorrectly) identified as “Canada’s first socialist party”. In respect to the Great Depression, there is only one bit of evidence from the Maritimes, in the form of a sad letter to R.B. Bennett from Murray Harbour, P.E.I. that once again confirms a regional image of helplessness.

From this stage onwards Newfoundland and Labrador fares slightly better than the Maritime Provinces, as there are two separate sub-chapters dealing with Newfoundland in the 20th century as well as two lesser sequences. It is as if the Canadian story had now located an even better candidate for the deviant eastern sub-plot of regrettable misfortune. The first of these treatments arrives in 1932 at the end of a sub-chapter entitled “Descent into Chaos”. Against a backdrop of crowds rioting in the streets and fishermen waiting on the wharves, the country is described as a “desperately poor Island nation” facing the suspension of self-government and reversion to colonial status. This is the first mention of Newfoundland in the post-1867 narrative, so apart from a reference to the “mysteriously wealthy” Richard Squires, there is no explanation of the origins of that moment of crisis. Nonetheless, the extreme outcome in Newfoundland serves an apposite purpose in the Canadian narrative, as “Canadians wonder if their own democracy will survive”. By the time we return to Newfoundland in Episode 15 (“Comfort and Fear”), the Second World War is over and it is time to consider Confederation. This is done in a sub-chapter entitled “From Sea to Sea”, which relates a familiar story in which Newfoundlanders must decide whether to “remain a colony, become a nation or join Canada”. The images feature contemporary street scenes and work on the wharves and water – in early colour – as well as film and photographs and (enacted) speech and song from the campaign. There is a healthy appreciation for anti-Confederate sentiment and some hints as to the internal regional and class dimensions of the debate, although more could have been made of the significance of the National Convention and the referendum as innovations in the Canadian constitutional process. Joe Smallwood’s own brand of nationalism is represented as an opportunistic appeal to the material interests of Newfoundlanders in favour of “union with the richer country”, and he is treated with some skepticism as a political operator who managed to have “cash” on his side – and 52 per cent of the vote on 22 July 1948. Thus Smallwood delivered himself out of a previously uncertain future and arrived at his own place in history as “the last father of Confederation”. By the time we return to Newfoundland in Episode 16, “Years of Hope and Anger”, we are able to witness some of the effects of the Smallwood regime in the resettlement plans that removed 30,000 people from 250 outports; the fishery seems to be doomed, and there is no reference to the mismanagement and exploitation that have destroyed the resource. Then, in a sub-chapter entitled “Going Down the Road”, families are leaving the Atlantic Provinces in the hundreds of thousands. The illustration is the Butler family of Bell Island, Newfoundland: after the closing of the iron mine in 1966, Hubert Butler found a job at the Ford plant in Windsor, where he was joined by his girlfriend Margaret; most of their siblings also made the decision to leave Bell Island. It appears to be a reasonable family strategy, and not inconsistent with the long history of migration and movement that runs through Canadian history. From this perspective, one would conclude that the region as a whole was suffering from inactivity and idleness. The struggle for a better share of the wealth and for new development strategies that mobilized people and communities and

even politicians in other parts of Atlantic Canada in this era do not appear relevant to the narrative in the *People's History*.

Back on the mainland, the regional narrative remains highly discontinuous. In Episode 16 Acadians make a brief appearance as participants in the struggle for language rights, as represented by the agitations of university students in Moncton; but the story lacks reference to the larger contexts of Acadian history – they have not been mentioned since the 18th century – and of Louis Robichaud's quiet provincial revolution of Equal Opportunity in 1960s New Brunswick or the more general Atlantic Revolution of the 1950s that preceded it in the several Atlantic Provinces. A parallel treatment of development as another form of victimization, however, shows us how the planners in Halifax "redeveloped" Africville against the resistance of the local Black community. Episode 17 includes a reference to Sandra Lovelace as part of the campaign for the rights of aboriginal women and Frank McKenna as an advocate of rewriting the Meech Lake Accord. At greater length, the environmental movement is represented by Elizabeth May and the campaigns against the DDT spruce budworm spray programmes in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Along with Smallwood, May thus appears to have been the most significant figure in the post-Confederation history of the region.

None of this, however, adds up to a sustained discussion of the significance of the Atlantic Provinces in the contemporary period. The region continues to appear as a zone where little of a constructive nature or national importance has happened. Except for the Confederation of Newfoundland, there seem to have been no decisive turning points or continuing struggles. In their place is an implied narrative of exploitation, disaster and failure. It is not possible to rehearse the regional historiography here, but it will be obvious to readers of *Acadiensis* that much more could be done to demonstrate the participation of the Atlantic Region in the larger story of Canadian development as well as to identify a narrative of events that have shaped the history of the region itself. For instance, it could be argued that campaigns of class and regional protest played their part in establishing the region as the home of an equal opportunity version of the Canadian identity that received at least some ratification in Section 36 of the Constitution Act (1982). As in the case of the pre-Confederation episodes, the second half of the *People's History* does not give viewers much assistance in understanding the place of the Atlantic Region in Canadian history. The obvious conclusion, Conrad suggested in her earlier review, is that a separate narrative will be needed if Canadians are to make sense of Atlantic Canada.¹⁵

Of course, *Canada: A People's History* is national history rather than regional history. For that matter, it is not "people's history" either, unless we take the view that "people's history" simply refers to a decision to produce history "for the people", in which case the preferable term should probably be "popular history".¹⁶ Whether it is

15 Conrad, "My Canada Includes the Atlantic Provinces", p. 402.

16 In international historiography, the term "people's history" is most prominently associated with a movement for the democratization of history, both in its political sympathies and, increasingly, in the way it is produced. The best-known works include A.L. Morton, *A People's History of England* (London, 1938) and Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York, 1980). In the Canadian context, the idea of a "People's History of Canada" was advanced in the 1940s by Marxist intellectuals such as Margaret Fairley and Stanley Ryerson, some of whose books may be considered

Public History and the People's History 131

also intended as a history of the Canadian “people” is equally uncertain, for the construction of an all-embracing historical identity has long been a problematic objective for contemporary historians. Recent standard textbooks such as J.M. Bumsted, *The Peoples of Canada* and Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, *A History of the Canadian Peoples*, have demonstrated some resourcefulness in addressing the challenge but continue to refer to the Canadian peoples in the plural rather than the singular. In this context *Canada: A People's History* is not so much the last word in Canadian historiography as an uneasy compromise between countervailing tendencies towards separate political and social histories of Canada. It resembles the classic texts in its emphasis on politics and wars as the main turning points, and it shows sensitivity for the experiences of ordinary people trying to make their way through the structures and circumstances imposed by history. But it tends to draw on the new social history opportunistically, without accepting its contributions to refocusing the periodization of Canadian history and reinterpreting the decisive forces in the making of modern Canada.

Because the episodes were completed by slightly different teams of writers and directors, each working at its own pace and with little interaction (and occasional failures in continuity), it is not always clear if there is an overarching interpretive theme in the *People's History*. This weakness is addressed in the “Epilogue” at the end of the final episode (“In an Uncertain Country”), which advances the metaphor of the journey as the key to Canadian history – “the place where a million epic journeys ended and a million new stories began”. The destination remains undetermined. In the first half of the *People's History*, much of the narrative was driven by the clash of empires, the conquest of territory and the emergence of new world peoples. The same theme is repeated in the second series in the story of the construction of the Canadian state and the quest for advantage, opportunity and identity in the new country. Unfortunately, the Atlantic Provinces receive less than adequate treatment in this account. To the extent that the struggle for the extension of political, social and economic democracy is even recognizable as a central theme in the post-Confederation narrative, the role of the Atlantic Provinces in that story is virtually invisible.

One incidental mystery hanging over the project remains the rather inexplicit role of the historical consultants whose familiar names (familiar to other academic historians, anyway) are prominently featured in the lists of credits for each episode. One promotional brochure even implied that historians played a major role in the making of the series, actually outnumbering the camera crews and directors – “seven camera crews, 15 directors and more than 70 historians”. Perhaps one or more of the group will in due course come forward to explain the role they played in the internal division of labour in this project. One suspects that their principal function was to

provisional installments on the unrealized project. A later generation of new leftists produced contributions to the genre in books such as Errol Sharpe's *A People's History of Prince Edward Island* (Toronto, 1976). James Green has recently argued that this kind of people's history is undertaken by historians with undisguised sympathies for social justice and is better understood as a kind of “movement history” because it “gives people hope by showing how collective struggles advanced democracy”. See James Green, *Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements* (Amherst, Mass., 2000).

assist the film-makers in identifying resources and that they had little part in the creative process, at least insofar as the defects identified in this review are concerned. To a large degree the internal history of the *People's History* seems to have been more about issues surrounding the political survival of the project and the exceptional logistics of production rather than about engagement with the historiographic content of the series. From this and other experiences, it seems that public history has still not identified the most appropriate ways for historians to collaborate in such projects.¹⁷

In a wide-ranging discussion of the challenges of visual history, Peter Burke has suggested that a “pictorial turn” may well have entered historical discourse in recent years. Nonetheless, he points out that it remains necessary to face the issues of evidence and interpretation that accompany any form of historical presentation. In a chapter entitled “From Witness to Historian”, Burke begins by quoting film director Roberto Rossellini to the effect that “Film should be a means like any other, perhaps more valuable than any other, of writing history”. But he goes on to point out that this cannot be regarded as an unmediated transmission of eyewitness evidence from the past: “The essential point is that a filmed history, like a painted history or a written history, is an act of interpretation”.¹⁸ From this perspective, it is probably time to expect somewhat more from history on film. History has always had a central place in the public discourse of society, and historians are in a position to help provide the context and perspective that make history both meaningful and controversial.

Film-makers are aware of this challenge too. In particular, Peter Watkins, whose classic *Culloden* (1964) is acknowledged as one of the inspirations for the *People's History*, has advanced a challenging critique of the dominant narrative form in contemporary film-making. Watkins argues that television in particular has adopted “the most authoritarian aspects of the cinema’s language form and narrative structures” and that the resulting “monoform” has produced “changes and distortions in our relationship to time, process and history”. The dominant language of rapid cutting, closed space and special effects may seem to be the most accomplished and sophisticated kind of film-making, but in Watkins’s view this barrage of technique tends to subdue the viewer into the passive consumption of inevitability and authority. The “monoform” thus promotes a “loss of history” in which there is only one outcome and one interpretation: “There is no dialogue with the spectator, who remains just that – an ‘onlooker’ – merely slotted into the very power-structure of the film or TV programme”. The result, Watkins argues, has “a divisive impact upon the social matrix, diminishing the desire for collective, alternative debate, and for sharing communal ideas on how our world might evolve”.¹⁹

Whether the *People's History* falls into the category of the closed Cartesian narrative or the open Hegelian epic may be a question best left for future debates in cultural history and film studies. At this stage, it is easy enough to recognize the series

17 Historian James Green has written about his experiences as a participant in the making of *The Great Depression* for Henry Hampton’s Blackside Films in *Taking History to Heart*, Chapter 7. For a discussion of public history initiatives in the context of Canadian labour history, see Craig Heron, “The Labour Historian and Public History”, *Labour/Le Travail*, 45 (Spring 2000), pp. 171-97.

18 Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, 2001), pp. 157-9.

19 For his discussion of the contemporary crisis in the mass audiovisual media (MAVM), see “Peter Watkins: Filmmaker and Media Critic”: <http://www.peterwatkins.lt/>

Public History and the People's History 133

as a crowning achievement of the 20th-century Canadian tradition of public broadcasting and documentary film. As a contribution to Canadian historiography, the *People's History* will probably be judged a successful popularization of a moderately revisionist reading of Canadian history. For these reasons it is likely to enjoy a long life representing Canadian history to Canadians and to the world. If the schools can afford to purchase the series, it will also play its part in educating several generations of Canadians who are more accustomed to watching television than reading textbooks. Despite identifiable failures of omission and otherwise, the *People's History* has shown that public history can help meet the taste for visual narrative and address the appetite for historical knowledge. In that sense the *People's History* may not be the end of the story, but the beginning of another one.

DAVID FRANK