

Rip Van Winkle and Rural History in Eastern Canada

Graeme Wynn

Volume 38, Number 2, Fall 2009

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad38_2re01

[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 article

Wynn, G. (2009). Rip Van Winkle and Rural History in Eastern Canada. *Acadiensis*, 38(2), 141–149.

REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

Rip Van Winkle and Rural History in Eastern Canada

THE INVITATION TO REFLECT ON two substantial new books on 19th-century rural life in eastern Canada has left me feeling a little like Rip Van Winkle, a bearded old man who has been away in the woods for a time and who finds, on return, that the community of scholars working on New Brunswick and Nova Scotia is no longer the one he knew, that there are new names on the spines of books, and that things once familiar and understood are no longer quite as he remembered them. I do not want to push this thought much (if any) further, for that might lead readers to the conclusion that my time “away” was spent sleeping on a grassy knoll, or that I have occupied myself these years past playing metaphorical nine-pins in an administrative amphitheatre with people who “maintained the gravest faces” while “evidently amusing themselves,” or even that I have “an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor.” Nonetheless, I remain acutely conscious, as I re-enter a territory I once knew well, of a certain stiffness in my intellectual joints and of the rustiness of my old firelock.¹

Strictly speaking, of course, neither Béatrice Craig nor Danny Samson, the authors of the books under consideration here – Craig’s *Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists: the Rise of Market Culture in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009) and Samson’s *The Spirit of Industry and Improvement: Liberal Government and Rural-Industrial Society, Nova Scotia, 1790-1862* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008) – are absolute newcomers to the Atlantic Canada scholarly community. Both have been engaged in intellectual conversations about the region since the 1980s. Béatrice Craig has been working on the economic and social transformations of eastern Canadian rural society for almost 30 years since she arrived in Orono from her native France and completed her doctoral thesis at the University of Maine in 1983 on “Family, Kinship and Community Formation on the Canadian-American Border: Madawaska, 1785-1842.” In the years since, Craig has authored a steady stream of publications in French and English dealing with and extending the themes of this early work. At the same time she has sustained, with remarkable dedication, a distinct body of scholarship centred on the evolving roles of middle class women and their families in northern France during and after the Industrial Revolution. Ultimately, these research projects, both of which have demonstrated admirable engagement with local archives and the capacity to make sense of disparate and fragmentary records, have complemented one another in serving Craig’s broad interest in the socio-economic and socio-cultural impacts of emerging industrial capitalism in Atlantic societies.²

Danny Samson came to the attention of established members of the Atlantic region’s scholarly community in the late-1980s, when he completed an exceptional master’s

1 Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle: A Posthumous Writing of Diedrich Knickerbocker,” in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 33-49. Also available at: <http://www.bartleby.com/195/4.html>. Various quotations in this essay are drawn from this source; as the context makes this evident, and given the brevity of the story and the decorative nature of my use of it, I have dispensed with specific footnotes for each quotation.

2 For Craig’s publications on Madawaska, see the bibliography of the book under review; for her European work, see the following: Béatrice Craig, Robert Beachy, et Alastair Owens, eds., *Women,*

thesis in history at the University of New Brunswick. Dealing with his home territory of Cape Breton, it focused, as its title indicates, on “The making of a Cape Breton coal town: dependent development in Inverness, Nova Scotia, 1899-1915,” and threw new light on the links between a weak agricultural economy and the drift of labour into the mines while refining understanding of the development and role of class in smaller industrial centres. Some of this was reported in an article Samson contributed to *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada, 1800-1950*, a 1994 collection of essays by several scholars that Samson edited and which broke a good deal of new ground in regional scholarship. Three years later, he submitted his 825-page doctoral thesis to Queen’s University, in Kingston, Ontario (from which *The Spirit of Industry and Improvement* draws substantially), and early in the new millennium he published a couple of essays in edited collections that foreshadowed and placed in comparative context some of the ideas in this book.³

Béatrice Craig acknowledges that she has had a long love affair with the history of Madawaska, that fascinating territory straddling the banks of the upper Saint John River and thus falling within the political jurisdictions and cultural influences of the state of Maine and the colonies of Lower Canada and New Brunswick as well as, subsequently, Canada and the United States. This devotion has been well requited, though not without a deal of devotion and effort. The very in-betweenness of this place poses many challenges for those who would understand it: different languages, laws, and linkages have shaped its history, and their influence must be traced in numerous archives scattered across Maine, New Brunswick, Massachusetts, Quebec, and Ontario. Béatrice Craig has toiled in them all, and developed an intimate sense of her region. Yet her book is not a regional monograph in the classic, geographical sense, but an analysis of the patterns of rural economic evolution that uses the Madawaska as a case study or laboratory for the examination of a set of questions that have been debated, often heatedly, by economic and social historians as well as historical geographers since the 1970s.

The fundamental points at issue in these debates have been the role of commercial production in the countryside and the nature of the transition to capitalism in rural

Business and Finance in Nineteenth Century Europe: Rethinking Separate Spheres (London: Berg, 2006); Béatrice Craig, “Catholic and Malthusian: The Entrepreneurs of Tourcoing in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 32, no. 2, (2007): 160-86 (special issue “Geburtenbeschränkung in historischer Perspektive,” ed. Rolf Gehrman); Béatrice Craig, « Patrons mauvais genre: Femmes et entreprises à Tourcoing au XIXe siècle » *Histoire sociale-Sociale History* 34, no. 68 (November 2001): 331-54; Béatrice Craig, “Lending women, borrowing women: Middle class women, investments and credit in northern France in the nineteenth century,” in *Women and credit: Researching the Past, Refiguring the Future*, ed. Beverly Lemire, Ruth Pearson, and Gail Campbell (Oxford: Berg Press, 2002), 51-72; and Béatrice Craig, “*Petites bourgeoises* or penny capitalists? Female retailers in northern France in the nineteenth century,” *Enterprise and Society* 2, no. 2 (June 2001): 198-224.

- 3 Daniel J. Samson, “The making of a Cape Breton coal town: dependent development in Inverness, Nova Scotia, 1899-1915” (master’s thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1988); Daniel J. Samson, “Dependency and Rural Industry: Inverness, Nova Scotia, 1899-1910,” in *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada, 1800-1850*, ed. Daniel J. Samson (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1994), 105-49; Daniel J. Samson, “Industry and Improvement: state and class formations on Nova Scotia’s countryside, 1790-1864” (PhD diss., Queen’s University, 1997).

economies and societies. Were 18th- and 19th-century settlers proto-capitalists who embraced the market (and the pursuit of profit) with alacrity as soon as opportunity offered, or were they community-minded souls satisfied with a “modest competence” who engaged commercial networks (reluctantly?) only to trade their (incidental) surpluses for commodities that the local economy could not produce? This is a much trickier question to answer than to ask. A focus on export-led growth theories (in Canada, broadly, the staples thesis) has led many to think in terms of the capitalist penetration of a pre-capitalist countryside, and to treat rural dwellers (implicitly at least) as pawns forced to adapt to a new commercial world order. Others have objected to this sort of characterization, insisted that settlers had agency, and noted the dangers of using the ideas and concepts of the present to interpret historical circumstances. James Henretta and Jim Lemon were not the first to think about these matters, but they crossed swords over them even as I completed graduate school. Lemon, incidentally, along with fellow colonial Americanists Gordon Wood and Danny Vickers, won a measure of fame when his contribution to the debate was cited in a bar-room scene in *Good Will Hunting*, the 1997 movie starring Ben Affleck and Matt Damon.⁴ Since then others have joined the discussion and provided more nuanced interpretations of “market forces,” “household economies,” and other critical terms (without drawing the attention of Hollywood). Despite these refinements, participants in the debate continue to talk past each other, much as Lemon and Henretta did 35 years ago.

To her credit, Craig helps to clarify the babel. She refuses the tendency, all too common in earlier discussions, to blur the argument by equating “commercial exchanges with capitalism” (which often used a form of circular reasoning) or associating “capitalism with a certain set of values” (including individualism and profit-maximizing) (18). By her account, very few Madawaska farmers were capitalists, in the Marxian sense, because there was no clear division between employers and waged labourers. Even merchants and manufacturers in this attenuated frontier community – in 1870 it numbered about 15,000 people in a 70-mile long ribbon of settlement that nowhere reached more than a few miles back from the Saint John River – evinced what some have described as a non-capitalist *mentalité* in their embrace of cooperation and mutuality, their failure to demand interest on loans, and their inability to calculate profits. Still, her Madawaskans were not isolated peasants. Many among them participated in the fur and timber trades, they shipped agricultural produce along the river, and they lived in a society in which there was a good deal of currency in circulation. Most seem to have been interested in raising their standard of living and

4 The relevant section of the film, a four-minute clip, can be viewed at <http://www.philipvickersfithian.com/2009/09/evolution-of-market-economy-in-southern.html>. On “competency,” see Daniel Vickers, “Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (January 1990): 1–29. For Lemon and Henretta, see James A. Henretta, “Families and Farms: Mentalite in Pre-Industrial America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 35, no. 1 (January 1978): 3–32 and James T. Lemon, “Comment on James A. Henretta’s ‘Families and Farms: Mentalite in Pre-Industrial America’,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 37, no. 4 (October 1980): 688–96. See also Gordon S. Wood, “Inventing American Capitalism,” *The New York Review of Books* 41, no. 11 (9 June 1994) and various contributions by Allan Kulikoff, including *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) (not listed in Craig’s bibliography).

ensuring that they were provided for in their old age. But in Craig's considered judgment they were utility [not profit] -maximizers, "and the utility they maximized was the one that benefited themselves and their wives" (20).

These conclusions are quarried from detailed analyses of different facets of the economic (and to lesser extent social) history of the region. A chapter on migrations and networks demonstrates that Madawaska was neither isolated nor insulated from the world beyond, and that the Acadians, Lower Canadians, and Anglophones who came to the area did so for economic opportunities offered by land or the timber trade. Language and religion set groups of people apart, but family and commercial networks linked Madawaskans to others. In the first generation or so these links were supplemented by the political connections of a small cadre of speculators – "clients [of powerful individuals elsewhere] who tried to become local patrons" (51) – and this contributed to the development of the local economy and community. The forest industry brought many changes to the area in the half-century after 1820. Craig devotes a chapter to the structure and politics of timber-making in Madawaska (which was known as the Disputed Territory until the settlement of the Maine-New Brunswick boundary dispute in 1842), and another to the rise of sawmilling in the second quarter of the 19th century. Through a close analysis of storekeeping in the region, Craig then concludes these three broadly related chapters (focused on the ways in which local and external economies intersected) with the observation that commerce in Madawaska differed from that in much of northeastern America because stores did not serve as the locus of exchange between local and imported goods. This function was usurped by the forest industries, which paid cash for labour, provisions, and transport services, monetarized the upper valley economy, and thus "allowed storekeepers and local people to escape the constraints of the barter system" (133).

Chapters six through nine examine the farm economy, asking what it meant to be a farmer on this frontier, about the extent of (and variability in) commercialization in Madawaska agriculture, and, through an examination of homespun production, whether there was anything akin to what Jan De Vries, a student of European economic history, has called an "industrious revolution" (in which rural women shifted their production from goods for the household to goods for the market) in the Madawaska. There is much new and valuable detail here, especially on the developing hierarchy of farms and the social stratification that emerged along the Saint John River; yet the industrious revolution question that Craig raises in her introductory chapter is, somewhat curiously, left without clear answer in this discussion.

On other matters, however, the intricate accounts unfolded by Craig allow her to claim firm conclusions: the people of Madawaska were not people in transition, caught between old (pre-capitalist) and new (commercial/capitalist) worlds and forced to adapt to logics imposed from afar. They were, rather, active sculptors of their own destinies. They made choices, albeit often without complete understanding of their (collective) consequences. Though most Madawaskans engaged in trade and participated in a market economy, this was not "a market economy ruled by, or in the interest of capitalists."⁵ The economy of

5 Michael Merrill, "Putting Capitalism in its Place," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 52, no. 2 (April 1995): 322.

Madawaska operated certainly at two, and most likely at three, levels: those of long-distance trade, local/regional exchange, and (less evidently) barter. These levels bear comparison with those identified by the *Annaliste* historian Ferdinand Braudel, although Craig doubts the significance of barter and prefers to regard it, insofar as it occurred, as an economic exchange rather than, as Braudel suggested, an element of material culture. Of the other two, only the local/regional market was competitive, transparent, and relatively predictable. To most of those engaged in it, the long-distance (staple) trade was opaque and unreliable, a lottery because there was so little timely, accurate information available on which those at the frontier end of things could base decisions about participation and investment. Thus it was that Madawaskans participated most consistently in local/regional exchange. They preferred to act in a familiar world of concrete and particular experience rather than chance their arms (and futures) in the abstract, impersonal timber trade. By and large, they responded to opportunities by working more rather than by changing the ways they conducted their lives, by hiring labour rather than acquiring new equipment and better seeds. Whether farmers or merchants, they generally stopped short of using money to make money, and in consequence the commercialization of exchange in Madawaska “did not lead to wholesale capitalism” (221). In this middle ground, this well-connected backcountry, the economy was an extension of the household; backwoods consumers were homespun capitalists.

These claims provide fruitful points for comparison between Craig’s work and Daniel Samson’s equally wide-ranging and thought-provoking arguments in *The Spirit of Industry and Improvement*. In choosing 1790 and 1862 as the temporal boundaries of his inquiry, Samson has placed his study in much the same chronological frame as Craig’s (although his geographical territory is considerably more expansive). His book sometimes claims rural Nova Scotia as its focus, but it is more accurately limited to that broad swath of territory running across the northern part of the colony, from Joggins in Cumberland County in the west to Cow Bay, Cape Breton, in the east and encompassing large parts of Pictou and Inverness counties between. This is an area perhaps 25 to 30 times larger than Madawaska. It is also challengingly diverse. Fertile valley bottom lands, productive intervals, rich reclaimed marshlands, densely forested hills, stone-riddled slopes, sandy plains, and impoverished soils at or beyond the climatic margins of wheat cultivation create a mosaic of varying agricultural potential. Peopled by Acadians since the mid-1700s, and by emigrants from Scotland and newcomers from other parts of the United Kingdom since the late-18th century, this is also the territory that David Frank once referred to, euphoniously, as the “country of coal,” where carboniferous strata crop out or lie just below the surface and the General Mining Association held (and developed) mining rights between 1827 and 1854.⁶

Seeking to understand the advent of modernity in this corner of the colonial world, Samson covers a lot of ground, mostly by describing “a series of locations where evidently traditional and modern practices met, clashing, merging, or existing side-by-side” (6). Several precepts guide Samson’s investigation. Modernity came to Nova Scotia with the beginnings of European settlement and was given expression through the displacement of Native peoples expedited by the bounding, enclosure, and commodification of land.

6 See, for instance, David Frank, “The Country of Coal,” *Labour / Le Travail* 21 (Spring 1988): 233-42.

The coming of modernity was contested, and entailed, notes Samson quoting Dipesh Chakrabarty, “ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and . . . tragedies and ironies.” Few newcomers understood their circumstances in Lockean terms and, as Samson maintains, “modernity’s seeds were firmly planted in many rural practices” – capitalism was not “a many-tentacled monster” that penetrated the countryside and conquered a traditional world but something that “grew from within.” Many settlers eschewed entreaties to invest in improving their farms, and turned down opportunities to use money to make money (3, 14–18). There are echoes of Samson’s earlier work in this, and much of it seems entirely conformable with claims in Craig’s *Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists*. We might begin to think that Craig and Samson belong to the same choir – the Giovane coro dei leoni [choir of young lions] perhaps? But if they do, they sing different parts. Pondering whether there was a “transition to capitalism” in colonial Nova Scotia, Samson comments in a register rather different from Craig’s: if so, it is best understood as “the gradual diminishment of the capacity of poor and middling settlers to achieve competency through means other than a complete reliance on the market” (6). There is much more conflict, on class and ideological lines, in Samson’s country of coal than in Craig’s Madawaska; both authors offer detailed materialist accounts of change in early-19th-century rural society, but he is much more concerned than she with the discursive dimensions of modernity’s transformation of the countryside through the spread of liberal capitalist ideas among its people and into its communities.

Samson signals this difference in emphasis when he sets out to cover “both the material and discursive bases of government in a rural, [and industrial] nineteenth-century, colonial context” (15, 18). This is a broad and challenging agenda, and *The Spirit of Industry and Improvement* is a bold and ambitious book, as even the leanest summary of its rich and varied content suggests. The first three chapters set the stage with discussions of early settlement, the ideas of two influential Nova Scotians who articulated rather different visions for the improvement of their society (John Young/Agricola and Thomas McCulloch), and the state’s limited capacity to regulate scattered and somewhat desultory efforts at mining through the first two decades of the 19th century. Two chapters then deal with the assertion of private (albeit state-supported) control over the production of grindstones (near Joggins) and coal (in the corridors of colonial power) in the third and fourth decades of the century – processes represented as the enclosure of the commons and “industrial colonization.” These are followed by chapters that explore material and discursive facets of the everyday lives of mining and farming families (mostly) in Pictou County, to show among other things that “although they were isolated and dependent . . . [miners] were not sheep” (186) and that the prospects of increasingly heterogeneous rural households were shaped by material circumstances and social considerations. Chapter eight, which bears comparison with Craig’s discussion of storekeeping and serves with her chapter on that topic as a hinge between the two books, deals with “Merchants in the Country of Coal” (mainly Cape Breton and Pictou) to demonstrate the crucial importance of credit and capital in rural communities, both in fostering economic growth and in sharpening the class lines that structured local politics. Then attention is turned to the enthusiasm for “improvement” articulated through colonial agricultural societies (with evidence drawn largely from Pictou County). This chapter and the related chapter seven suggest, vide Craig, that many Nova Scotia farmers were reluctant to change the ways they conducted their lives. Chapter ten considers the antimonopoly sentiments directed against the General Mining Association in particular, before the author reflects upon his work in a brief concluding chapter.

Through all of this, Samson is concerned to “gauge both the breadth of liberalism’s hold on the popular imagination and the obstacles and negotiations that it necessarily encountered” (17). His inquiry draws its pedigree from several sources, not least among them his doctoral supervisor Ian McKay’s 2000 essay “The Liberal Order Framework” in the *Canadian Historical Review*.⁷ Samson seeks the origins, or precursors, of this framework in the Nova Scotia countryside. His quest is, in a sense, the inverse of that embarked upon by Jamie Murton, another McKay student, who sought to mark liberalism’s later manifestation (as new liberalism) in British Columbia.⁸ In pursuit of these origins, Samson’s focus encompasses the development of instruments of state power but is centred on close analysis of “public discourse, local practices and the growth of civil society” (17). It complicates and de-centres existing perspectives on state formation in North America, first by attending to the messy matter of the exercise of power (rather than focusing upon aspirations of influence) and, second, by offering a view of change from the countryside rather than the (capital) city. In doing the latter it brings resistance and conflict into a story often represented as a straightforward, relatively smooth, and teleologically inevitable path of progress towards peace, order, and good government (so to speak). There is nothing quite like this in the Canadian literature. Variety and difference are revealed through the often skilful and even imaginative use of fragmentary evidence, which offers glimpses of the views held by “the poor, the political opponents and the apostates” as they confronted “the state’s penetration of the civil realm” (12).

Those whose scholarly apprenticeships have been fulfilled in the shadow of recent discussions of the transition to capitalism, state formation in colonial settings, and the liberal order framework in Canadian history will find much to their liking in these two books. *Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists* and *The Spirit of Industry and Improvement* are significant contributions to ongoing conversations on these themes that are deeply rooted in archival research, thoughtful in their use of evidence, and engaged with a larger world of ideas and interpretations. Yet – and here Mr. Van Winkle makes his presence felt again – my reading of these new works sometimes left me feeling as perplexed as old Rip was when he awoke. As good histories will, both of these books engage with earlier scholarship on New Brunswick and Nova Scotia as well as, more broadly, with work on rural life and Canadian development. Their authors know the work of their predecessors, but they hold their own distinct views of the past and of those who peopled it. Time and again in these pages I found myself in the company of individuals about whom I had read or written, contemplating footnotes to archival collections that I had explored, and discovering (more often than I expected) citations to my own publications, but not quite recognizing them. To speak metaphorically in terms that Van Winkle would have understood as he contemplated the repainted sign outside the renamed inn on the village green (after sleeping through the War of Independence), it sometimes seems that the face of King George has been transformed into that of George Washington. Here, it seemed that I had found the gully up which my companions and I proceeded some yesteryear, only to discover a “mountain stream was now foaming down

7 Ian McKay, “The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History,” *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (December 2000): 616–78.

8 James Murton, *Creating a Modern Countryside: Liberalism and Land Resettlement in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007).

it, leaping from rock to rock, and filling the glen with babbling murmurs.” There, I had to ask, as Van Winkle did, how once-familiar places seemed so changed, even as his gaze reassured him that “there stood the Catskill Mountains – there ran the silver Hudson at a distance – there was every hill and dale precisely as it had always been”

It seems to me, for instance, that Craig’s discussion of Madawaska agriculture is significantly more original than her treatment of timber-making and lumber production in that area (a topic well-treated in Richard Judd’s *Aroostook* and to a degree in Richard Wood’s history of lumbering in Maine as well as to some extent in my *Timber Colony*), and that Samson’s discussions of Pictou county settlement, mining, and agriculture were substantially adumbrated in earlier work by Julian Gwyn, Robert MacKinnon, Alan MacNeil, Larry McCann, and myself (in this journal in 1990).⁹ None of this work is unacknowledged, but my sense is that it is more often used as a foil against which to make particular, somewhat contrary, claims than read sympathetically as the product of particular (and different) conjunctures. A couple of examples should suffice. Craig is at pains to argue for the instability of the long-distance trade in wood, which, she says, “looked more like a lottery” than an activity offering “good opportunities for long-term profits,” and she insists that neither timber-making nor sawmilling generated effective linkages. Both of these assertions seem to be offered, in part, as correctives to arguments in *Timber Colony*. But that 1981 book noted (regrettably and unnecessarily reaching for a \$2.00 word) that the instability of transatlantic markets for timber made a “gigantic banadalore” [yo-yo] of New Brunswick’s economy (an observation that Craig describes in a footnote – #5 on page 74 – as a “bleak comment”). So, too, I would suggest, the lack-of-linkages argument holds up, only and if at all, in respect of backward rather than final-demand linkages. Similarly, when Samson reviews the earlier literature on state formation in British North America, he finds most of the contributions to Allan Greer and Ian Radforth’s *Colonial Leviathan* wanting for their failure to discuss resistance and negotiation.¹⁰ Although he bestows a few appreciated pats on my own contribution to that collection, I am also found guilty of underestimating the capacity of the state and the extent of popular resistance to its influence, and indicted for my failure to indicate when society was not liberal (16). Well, all of these essays were written 20 years ago, and I think that most of us who contributed to the volume felt that we were sketching new vistas rather than offering definitive charts for the ages. Earlier work had its share of errors, omissions, and oversights to be sure, and their correction is welcome; but it,

9 Richard W. Judd with Patricia A. Judd, *Aroostook: A Century of Logging in Northern Maine* (Orono, ME: University of Maine Press, 1989); Richard G. Wood, *A History of Lumbering in Maine* (Orono, ME: University of Maine Press, 1935); Graeme Wynn, *Timber Colony: A Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth Century New Brunswick* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981); Julian Gwyn, *Excessive Expectations: Maritime Commerce and the Economic Development of Nova Scotia, 1740-1870* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998); Robert MacKinnon, “The Historical Geography of Agriculture in Nova Scotia, 1851-1951” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 1991); Alan MacNeil, “Society and Economy in Rural Nova Scotia, 1761-1861 (PhD diss., Queen’s University, 1990); Lawrence D. McCann, “The Mercantile-Industrial Transition in the Metal Towns of Pictou County, 1857-1931,” *Acadiensis* X, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 29-64; Graeme Wynn, “‘Exciting a Spirit of Emulation Among the Plodholes’: Agricultural Reform in Pre-Confederation Nova Scotia,” *Acadiensis* XX, no. 1 (Autumn 1990): 5-51.

10 Allan Greer and Ian Radforth, eds., *Colonial Leviathan: state formation in mid-nineteenth-century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

like all scholarship, was a product of its times, and the times they are forever changing.

More consequentially, I worried at times as I read these books that my mind “misgave” me, and (with my man Rip) “began to doubt whether both [we] and the world around [us] were not bewitched.” Given their strongly self-evident assertions, I hardly know what to make of such claims as the following: that large commercial sawmills in Madawaska “remained extensions of the lumber trade and subject to its vagaries,” and that “when the forest industry declined in the latter part of the 1880s so did commercial milling” (*Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists*, 10). By the same token, I have struggled, since reading *The Spirit of Industry and Improvement*, to see the colony’s advocates of agricultural improvement as the advance guard of liberalizing ideas in the countryside. My reading of many of the agricultural society records from which Samson draws his interpretation casts the small cadre of merchants and wealthy farmers who embraced the rhetoric of agricultural improvement as a patrician group acutely conscious of their place in an hierarchical social order rather than as liberal levelers.¹¹ Yes, they argued for what they believed to be better agricultural practices, and yes, these practices might be construed as means for ordinary farmers to improve their circumstances (a form of self-help?), but the proposals were generally ill-fitted to the place and time into which they were being inserted. They reflected a borrowed sense that English high farming (and is there significance in that term?) was the height of good practice rather than a close understanding of conditions in rural Nova Scotia. In the end, such matters leave me wondering quite what “the making of liberal government” entails. Engaging the confusing debate about the transition to capitalism, Craig sharpens her vision by seeking precise definitions (i.e., the lack of a clear division between employers and waged labourers meant that, for Craig, very few Madawaska farmers were capitalists in the Marxian sense). Tighter framings of the meanings attached to both “liberal society” and “class” would have, I think, made Samson’s argument more convincing and lifted a fine book that offers a rich understanding of many facets of life in rural Nova Scotia to unparalleled heights.

None of this is to suggest, for a moment, however, that these recent contributions are anything less than significant additions to scholarship on British North America. They provide thoughtful, detailed accounts of the struggles and accomplishments of those who gave shape and substance to the economies and societies of pre-Confederation Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. They afford important agency to the women and men who worked the fields, farmsteads, kitchens, looms, and mines of the developing colonies. And they force readers to think about the larger implications of the lives and choices of those who preceded them. If some of the roots of our liberal capitalist democracies remain obscure, we are better for being forced to think about the long and often-difficult gestation of frequently taken-for-granted current circumstances. If Rip Van Winkle was disconcerted by what he took to be a “busy, bustling, disputatious tone” in the buzz of conversation outside the new village inn on his return, it is important to recall that he soon got “into the regular track of gossip” and came to understand what had transpired “during his torpor” to the point that he found more value in the animated conversations of the rising generation than in “the accustomed phlegm and drowsy tranquility” of yesteryear.

GRAEME WYNN

11 See Wynn, “‘Exciting a Spirit of Emulation Among the Plodholes’.”