

A Conversation with Ernest R. Forbes

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Article abstract

Ernest R. (Ernie) Forbes needs no elaborate introduction to readers of this journal. Distinguished historian and long-serving member of the Department of History at the University of New Brunswick until his retirement in 2001, he authored the lead article in the very first issue of Acadiensis (Autumn/automne 1971) and subsequently became a frequent contributor. He has served continuously on the journal's Editorial Board since 1974. This "Conversation" is offered in honour of the Spring 2012 publication by Acadiensis Press of The Education of an Innocent: An Autobiography by E.R. "Ernie" Forbes (in which this "Conversation" also appears).

CONVERSATION

*Il n'est pas nécessaire de présenter en détail Ernest R. (Ernie) Forbes aux lecteurs de cette revue. Cet historien distingué qui a été membre du Département d'histoire de l'Université du Nouveau-Brunswick durant de nombreuses années, jusqu'à sa retraite en 2001, a signé l'article principal du tout premier numéro d'Acadiensis (automne/Autumn 1971), dont il est devenu un fréquent collaborateur par la suite. Il a été membre du comité de rédaction de la revue sans interruption depuis 1974. Cette « conversation » est offerte pour souligner la parution de l'ouvrage *The Education of an Innocent: An Autobiography* by E.R. "Ernie" Forbes (dans lequel apparaît aussi la « Conversation »), publié par Acadiensis Press au printemps 2012.*

*Ernest R. (Ernie) Forbes needs no elaborate introduction to readers of this journal. Distinguished historian and long-serving member of the Department of History at the University of New Brunswick until his retirement in 2001, he authored the lead article in the very first issue of Acadiensis (Autumn/automne 1971) and subsequently became a frequent contributor. He has served continuously on the journal's Editorial Board since 1974. This "Conversation" is offered in honour of the Spring 2012 publication by Acadiensis Press of *The Education of an Innocent: An Autobiography* by E.R. "Ernie" Forbes (in which this "Conversation" also appears).*

A Conversation with Ernest R. Forbes

ACADIENSIS (ACAD): So how was it that you became a historian?¹

E.R. FORBES (ERF): Well, it wasn't as a result of a lot of planning. I just wanted to improve my teaching license and so after taking an undergraduate degree and a teaching degree at Mount A, I decided that I wanted to do a master's but I had specialized in Classics at Mount A. I didn't see that there was a great deal of a future for a teacher of Latin and so I decided to make the switch to History. I applied [in 1964] to the closest school, Dalhousie. And they, after some head scratching, decided to admit me to a preliminary year. So I took a full load of History courses with a little enrichment for one year and the next year entered a master's program in History.

ACAD: When did you first have the thought that you might pursue this to university teaching, to the doctoral level?

¹ This conversation is an edited text based on two interviews with Professor Ernest R. Forbes, on 12 July 2011 and 24 September 2011. The interviewer for *Acadiensis* was John G. Reid, co-editor. Full tapes and transcripts of the interviews will be deposited at the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, along with further materials used by Professor Forbes in consultation with Stephen Dutcher while making final revisions and additions to the text in February 2012. The revised and added passages have been fully integrated, with square brackets reserved for editorial insertions. For further autobiographical details, see Ernest R. Forbes, *The Education of an Innocent: An Autobiography* by E.R. "Ernie" Forbes (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 2012, in which this conversation is also included as an appendix. Special thanks to Lauren Dalrymole, who painstakingly transcribed the tapes.

ERF: Well at this time I was married and feeling the responsibility for the first time.² It wasn't just a lark, one had to buckle down. And I can remember the terror with which [in 1965] I awaited the posting of the grades at Dalhousie. I wasn't thinking about doctorate, or even master's that much; I had to have decent results. I ran into Guy MacLean,³ and he realized people were on edge about these grades. He said "Well, you passed, there is no reason to worry – in fact, you did rather well." And "rather well" translated into a full scholarship for the next year. At that point, I still had a thesis to produce and I'm not sure what a thesis is but they had offered me money that could begin in the spring if I was ready to do the research and my thesis. I wasn't going to let scholarship money go begging. So, what's a thesis [laughs] and how does one get started on a thesis? Well, I ran into George Rawlyk,⁴ and George said "We've had a number of theses done on political administrations," and he referred me to Murray Beck's book⁵ (which had come out about then), and he said "Well, now this administration is being done and this one has been done. But why not try this one, the Rhodes-Harrington Administration?" And I, knowing nothing, said "Why not?" Then the question was, well, how do you research a thesis? I wasn't sure, but I looked at a couple of theses and the idea seemed to be you'd look up old newspapers and stuff and write accounts of them, tell stories and so on. I can remember being asked what I was working on, and I'd just finished reading Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*,⁶ and so not really knowing what I was doing at all I came up with this topic – "The Rise and Fall of the Conservative Party in the Provincial Politics of Nova Scotia" [laughs]. Now, I thought it was a complete scam quite frankly. I later realized that most research applications are made without knowing what the results are going to be. I began to piece together a story. It was a matter of staying on focus because there were all kinds of interesting things going on in the papers, and it wasn't a matter of knowing where I was going. It was just read, take notes, read, take notes. Near the end of the summer I ran into George Rawlyk again – "How is your thesis going?" "Well, I've been working through the summer," I responded (I thought it was going alright). "Well, what have you written?" "I haven't written anything – I'm still doing research," I said. And he said: "Until you have something written you haven't even started." And that was a piece of advice that I passed on to a lot of students over the years. I was lucky in a way, not having had a real Canadian History course at all. I should have done the background reading but, one, there was no background reading to speak of, and two, it would have required a lot more sophistication than I had. But to put together a story, well I could do that.

ACAD: Did you enjoy the research from the start, or was it a more gradual kind of evolution?

2 Ernest Forbes married Irene MacConnell on 13 July 1963.

3 Guy R. MacLean, a professor of history at Dalhousie University until 1980, is a president emeritus of Mount Allison University.

4 George A. Rawlyk, 1935-1995, was a professor of history at Queen's University, and previously at Mount Allison and Dalhousie universities. See "George Rawlyk Remembered" and "George Alexander Rawlyk: A Bibliography, 1962-1996," *Acadiensis* XXV, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 151-73.

5 J. Murray Beck, *The Government of Nova Scotia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957). J. Murray Beck, 1914-2011, was a professor of political science at Dalhousie University.

6 William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).

ERF: Well I enjoyed it, I think, and the fact Irene came along and I think enjoyed it too, was an indication that we were having fun. So when fall came I enrolled in the first year. I had no Atlantic Canada or Nova Scotia history courses in my background, [except that] I had taken one History of Canada in summer school. Gertrude Tratt,⁷ I think, gave it that year. But that's not a very substantial background for research in Nova Scotia or the Maritimes. [As thesis supervisor], Bruce Fergusson,⁸ the archivist, was a very shy man and really there were two kinds of thesis supervisors: you had the ones who look over your shoulder and tell you what you should conclude from all of this, and then you had the ones that leave you alone completely. And you sink or swim on your own. I think Dr. Fergusson was one of those who left you alone until the final draft and put in maybe a few suggestions, on grammar, spelling and what not, and that was it. George Rawlyk was the other extreme; he was intensely interested. Well, as I say, [Rawlyk] gave me a push at key points in looking for a supervisor, but there were rumours of tension between Fergusson and Peter Waite.⁹ Fergusson [as provincial archivist] kept the [W.S.] Fielding papers closed. And Peter couldn't have appreciated that. But if Peter Waite couldn't get into the Fielding papers, would I be able to get into the Rhodes papers? This required a little Machiavellian thinking on my part. I chose Dr. Fergusson for a supervisor in part thinking that [chuckles] down the road sometime I would win his confidence sufficiently that I'll get to see some of the Rhodes papers. And that's the way it worked out. He even offered me a job in the archives.

ACAD: Was Peter Waite also an influence?

ERF: Nowadays we would call him a mentor. The first paper that I gave in his seminar was at an evening meeting at his home. Peter met us with tall tumblers full of a clear liquid. I knew it was strong, but I was nervous and sipped away as I delivered my paper. The next day I was startled by how little I could remember of the evening before. Peter wrote on my paper a single comment: "I particularly liked your delivery." My friend Gordon Brown,¹⁰ who was a graduate student a year ahead of me, later made the connection with the previous year's seminar, when the grad student who was presenting had mischievously asked "Dr. Waite, is there any gin in this drink? – I can't taste any." "That is a perfectly good drink," a slightly ruffled Waite had responded. But it appears that with my group Peter took no chances! Years later, when I gave my first paper on the Intercolonial Railway, "Agent of the Hinterland," Peter Waite was sitting in the front row. I presented it to him, in the sense that I was looking for his approval from the beginning of the session. After my session was over, I can remember hearing a comment under the voice: "That business about the Intercolonial – that was very

7 Gertrude E.N. Tratt was formerly a teacher in the public school system in Halifax, and an instructor at Dalhousie University.

8 C. Bruce Fergusson, 1911-1978, was the provincial archivist of Nova Scotia, 1956-1978, and holder of an adjunct position at Dalhousie University.

9 Peter B. Waite is a professor emeritus of history at Dalhousie University.

10 Gordon Brown is a retired high school history teacher, who taught for many years at South Colchester Rural High School in Brookfield, Nova Scotia.

11 For a recollection of the conference at Saint Mary's University in 1974, see E.R. Forbes, "The Intercolonial Railway and the Decline of the Maritime Provinces Revisited," *Acadiensis* XXIV, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): 3n2; the 1974 paper launched the arguments that would be further

interesting. Do you suppose there's any truth in it?" And someone else replied, "No, if there was, we'd have heard it by now."¹¹ Anyway that's a digression!

ACAD: So Peter Waite had something to do with your decision to go to Victoria the first time, in 1966?

ERF: Oh yeah [laughs]. Sydney Pettit,¹² the head out there, had written to Waite, looking for somebody with teaching experience preferably. And when Peter came in with this letter in his hand and read a part of it, they were looking for somebody to teach Canadian History, he looked at me, right after he said the teaching experience, and I looked out the window because Irene and I were planning on going to Europe the next year. But when I talked to Irene, she said "Well, we haven't seen Europe but we haven't seen North America either and they want to pay us for this?!" [laughs]. So I must have written a letter of application at some point, but I don't remember doing it. It seemed to have been arranged very neatly between Peter Waite and Sydney Pettit.

ACAD: Now two years later you're on your way to Queen's as a doctoral student. How did that come about?

ERF: I went to Peter Waite and said "Who should I choose for a mentor, a thesis supervisor?" And by this time I had developed an interest in something called the Maritime Rights Movement as a possible next thesis, and Peter said "Well, who knows the most about it?" I said "Probably Roger Graham"¹³ and he said "Roger's a lovely fellow – you couldn't make a better choice." And I had no reason not to agree with that ever since. He was a splendid supervisor and friend.

ACAD: So just taking a step back from there, why the Maritime Rights Movement? What was it that piqued your interest?

ERF: I went to Victoria, did some teaching, and the Centennial Commission – it was Centennial year – financed some special seminars in honour of that occasion and one of the organizers said "Well, it's being held to get some of you guys out of Toronto, to look at the rest of the country." Now I had just barely finished my master's thesis, and I'm feeling very diffident about a seminar with half a dozen of the leading historians in Canada. And that included Mike Bliss and Viv Nelles – it was very much the cream of the crop.¹⁴ So I was there because I was a member of the department at Victoria and

developed in Ernest R. Forbes, "Misguided Symmetry: The Destruction of Regional Transportation Policy for the Maritimes," in David Jay Bercuson, ed., *Canada and the Burden of Unity* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), 60-86.

12 Sydney G. Pettit was formerly a professor of history at the University of Victoria.

13 W. Roger Graham, 1919-1988, was a professor of history at Queen's University.

14 Michael Bliss is an emeritus university professor of history at the University of Toronto; H.V. (Viv) Nelles is the L.R. Wilson Professor in Canadian History at McMaster University. A selection of the papers from the five seminars was published as Mason Wade, ed., *Regionalism in the Canadian Community, 1867-1967: Canadian Historical Association Centennial Seminars* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1969). The organization of the seminars was discussed in Wade, "Foreword," v-vii. Among the stated purposes, revealingly, was "to break down a still persistent regionalism by bringing together participants from all parts of the country and from both basic cultures to consider jointly their common national problems" (vi). The Victoria seminar was held on 22 August 1967.

they hosted one of the seminars. I showed up the first day to find out how such things operated. They had an opening session, and while that was going on, the guy came over and said “Look, we want you to criticize George Rawlyk’s paper” on the paranoid style in the politics of Nova Scotia.¹⁵ And I was pretty uncertain, as I say, about handling the material of a relatively senior historian, and so, [since] there was no saying no, that was what I had to do. So my critique was that there was nothing particularly paranoid about Maritime attitudes and that they had reason to feel that they had been hard done by in Confederation. I had done a little preliminary research on that, and so I finished my argument and I looked around. Where would I get any support? Well, there was a guy there who said he was from Prince Edward Island. Maybe I could count on him; he was one of the chairs. So he grabbed the mic and said “You know, it’s whining like that the Maritimes does not need.” Well, I kind of felt like hiding under the table, but I sat tight while various people had much to say. I got the microphone back again and I kind of wondered how one should handle the question of objectivity, and I had noticed that one of the reviews of Beck’s book had criticized his “Bluenose bias.” Then I thought somebody who gives such a straight and objective portrayal of things that Beck does and he’s still getting criticized – might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. I never worried about it afterwards. I always was openly partisan, I think. Anyway, by the time that seminar was over, I was feeling quite uninhibited at that point – there was nothing to lose. Later Pat Roy,¹⁶ who reinforced my regional approach from the west side of the country, said “I doubt you’ve convinced anybody but you certainly impressed a few.” Of course, Pat was kind and supportive always. So at that point I know I’ve got a thesis topic.

ACAD: In later years you have become very well known for combating these stereotypes of the kind that the chair expressed at that seminar and for identifying insulting portrayals . . .

ERF: Oh look, I had to listen for hours to everybody trying out their Maritime jokes. And that certainly solidified my intent to write on the Maritime Rights Movement.

ACAD: Was that seminar a key moment for you, where you really not only discovered that here was a thesis topic, but also kind of discovered something in here that said I need to take on these kinds of misleading . . .

ERF: I think you are right on. I think it really was important. I think I was working towards the same topic, I had all kinds of material at the Centennial seminar which I could sort of pull down, if you will. I found I had it when [laughs] the adrenaline began to flow and the young Toronto boys didn’t terrify me because I didn’t really know who they were – but it was an experience.

ACAD: Well let’s take you now to Queen’s, where you started in 1968. You decide to go into the doctoral program, you have a thesis topic in mind, but first you have to take seminars, courses, and so on. Did you run into any of the same attitudes, the same kind of ideas that oh, this Maritime stuff is not terribly important?

15 Later published under two different titles: G.A. Rawlyk, “Nova Scotia Regional Protest, 1867-1967,” *Queen’s Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (Spring 1968): 103-23; and George Rawlyk, “The Maritimes and the Canadian Community,” in Wade, ed., *Regionalism in the Canadian Community*, 100-16.

16 Patricia E. Roy is a professor emeritus of history, University of Victoria.

ERF: That attitude was there. But I ran into the stereotype. I mean I can remember my landlord taking some time to say, “What are we going to do about those lazy bums down in the East? How can you energize them, what can we do about them?” Now these are people who would invite you to dinner, they’re very kind; they think they are very polite. Lazy bums, I don’t have to say that that excludes you, but – it was insulting. And now in the academic sphere, I was in George Rawlyk’s seminar. But there were four of us who had previously taught at the university level and it became a powerful seminar. Bill Godfrey,¹⁷ Neil MacKinnon¹⁸ – these were potential allies. I can remember I gave the first paper in the seminar, and I’m working in the library just getting the final touches and ideas in place, and Bill Godfrey strolls by and he said “Ernie, I want to attack your paper here, here, here.” And so I had time to think, time to prepare, and that set the tone. Next paper, same thing happens, with people coming and warning. And with the warning in mind, you can give a much better presentation; maybe the guy giving the paper won’t score as many points, but And we fought furiously, you know, in our debating and so on [laughs]. It was largely a sham, eh? Worked fine for us and as the teacher I’m sure it worked for Rawlyk. We just put on a better show that was all.

ACAD: So you were expected to be competitive?

ERF: Absolutely!

ACAD: But people like yourself and Bill and Neil, you kind of domesticated that, so you could have a good debate . . .

ERF: That’s right, and nobody gets hurt.

ACAD: Did everybody in the seminar play by the rules or were there some who didn’t?

ERF: That seminar we basically played by the rules. Now there was once I felt badly. I really hadn’t had much time to prepare for some reason – for one of the seminars I wasn’t well prepared and I took some obvious point or made some obvious criticism and Big George came thundering right over me, adopted the argument and pounded the poor beggar that was giving the paper. I remember that, but it wasn’t me breaking the rules so much as I wasn’t well enough prepared to know what was going on, so I said something and George picked it up.

ACAD: It sounds like your Mount Allison experience in debating must have come in quite useful at that point.

ERF: I think the debating was very influential and very important. In the absence of any sophistication from the historical perspective, one could simply take, develop an argument, and you could do a history essay that way too you know. And, well, a number of my papers are simply organized by a debate or one side in the debate. Competition can be a useful teaching tool. While I was at Dalhousie a student came

17 William G. Godfrey, 1941-2008, was a professor of history at Mount Allison University. See Patricia L. Belier, “William G. Godfrey, 1941-2008: A Bibliography,” *Acadiensis* XXXVII, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2008): 106-16.

18 Neil MacKinnon was formerly a professor of history at St. Francis Xavier University.

down from Toronto – Ken McLaughlin¹⁹ – [and] if he wasn't reflecting the stereotype and so on I expected him to, so we struck sparks off each other. In the first paper I got 78, he got 78. The second paper he got 80 and I got 80, the third paper he got 82 and I got 82. We weren't competing, oh no! [laughs]. But then he brought a much greater sophistication to the subjects and questions; he was ahead on the exam. He is a very strong defender of local and regional history or was at the Learned's a few years back, the last time I saw him give a paper.

ACAD: So let's pick it up again at Queen's. You'd taken George Rawlyk's seminar. Did you then do your full-time research or was your research mainly done more part-time when you were at UVic the second time?

ERF: Well, yeah, I had the bright idea that I could finish up faster than normal, not going to have a thesis drag on for years, and Irene was helping me as a kind of research assistant and I started working longer hours, cutting out breaks and wound up on my back with phlebitis, which is an occupational hazard, or can be. Ironically George Rawlyk died of it as did Ken MacKirdy.²⁰ I was in distinguished company. Well, I spent a few weeks in bed, and recuperated and came back much more cautiously to working. I did locate the [H.S.] Congdon papers,²¹ it was one of those pleasant surprises, and I spent a delightful week or so at their [the Congdon family's] place. They were Maritimers away from home and very conscious of that. So they brought us right into their home and they fed us and brought the papers down to us and then sent us off with the whole set of papers. Then [in 1970] it was back to Victoria, and while out there I had invitations to present papers at various places, including Saint Mary's and UNB. The letter from UNB looked very much like it had been written with my name in mind, looking for a regionalist on the Atlantic Provinces and a specialty in Nova Scotia. Now I guess they had somebody else in mind, too, but that was it. And really I was flattered to be recruited so to speak. I had been treated very well in Victoria, and I would have wanted to stay, but now if I was going to be living in Victoria I would either have had to change my topic or change my location. I figured, before we had children I could go – I was pretty "portable." When the kids arrived, a decision had to be made.

ACAD: The first Atlantic Canada Studies conference in 1974 was important in your move to the University of New Brunswick?

ERF: Well, I presented the paper and noticed that a few people slipped out as the paper was going on and that seemed a little strange. But I had other things to attend to – I was giving the paper. Afterwards Jim Chapman,²² I think he was the department head at the time, came over and made the offer of a position. Apparently they had wanted to check me out one last time before they committed themselves.

19 Kenneth McLaughlin is a distinguished professor emeritus of history at the University of Waterloo.

20 Kenneth A. MacKirdy, 1920-1968, was a professor of history at the University of Waterloo.

21 H.S. Congdon was a leading figure in the Maritime Rights Movement. See Ernest R. Forbes, *The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919-1927: A Study in Canadian Regionalism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979), 105-9.

22 James K. Chapman, 1919-1999, was a professor of history at the University of New Brunswick.

My only concern was that they would see exactly what they were getting. Because I was happy in Victoria, Victoria seemed happy with me. I didn't want to leave that kind of security if there was major controversy or problem with my appointment. There didn't seem to be any; they made it very easy not to have to present myself as something I may not have been.

ACAD: UNB at that time, and then of course all the more so for your arrival, was a pretty powerful centre of Canadian history, but Maritime history in particular. So when you arrived to join the department, it must have felt like a good fit with so many colleagues?

ERF: It really did, with Bill²³ and Phil,²⁴ and Bernie,²⁵ and Ernie. Anyway, it was an appointment into a, really, even tighter team, with *Acadiensis*, and I'd got in on the ground floor with my article on prohibition. So that gave me confidence. They had samples, pretty good samples, of my writing.

ACAD: How important was *Acadiensis* at that time, to the department?

ERF: Well it gave us something we had to work for. Buckner was the quarterback, I mean he went to Bill Acheson and said "I want this chapter from your thesis and I want this." You know he came to me a few years later and said "Look, we'd like to try a few book-length publications, find me one." So the book with Tony MacKenzie²⁶ and I on the "demon rum" was a result of that.²⁷ He [Buckner] was a dynamic force and when he got something in his mind. Plus there was such a good rapport within the department itself that there were historians who more or less stepped aside and let the Canadianists go with something that they thought was important. And they must have thought it was important too, because you don't often get that kind of cooperation among different fields, even with the best of will, as we managed there.²⁸

ACAD: There were a number of members of the department who were on the board of *Acadiensis*, who were not Maritime historians, who took a very active role – like Ken Windsor?²⁹

23 T. William Acheson is a professor emeritus in history at the University of New Brunswick.

24 Phillip Buckner is a professor emeritus in history at the University of New Brunswick, and senior research fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London.

25 Bernard L. Vigod, 1946-1988, was a professor of history at the University of New Brunswick.

26 A.A. (Tony) MacKenzie, 1926-2004, was a professor of history at St. Francis Xavier University.

27 Clifford Rose, *Four Years with the Demon Rum*, ed. E.R. Forbes and A.A. MacKenzie (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 1980).

28 On *Acadiensis* and related developments in the UNB Department of History, see David Frank, "Acadiensis, 1901 and 1999," paper presented to Organization of American Historians (Toronto, 1999), <http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/Acadiensis/bin/>; P.A. Buckner, "'Limited Identities' Revisited: Regionalism and Nationalism in Canadian History," *Acadiensis* XXX, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): esp. 4-11; and Judith Fingard, "Focusing on their Roots: University of New Brunswick Historians and Regional History," *Acadiensis* XXX, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): esp. 42-4. Forbes wrote a corresponding article to Fingard's, on another highly influential department: E.R. Forbes, "Dalhousie University and the Flowering of Atlantic Provinces Historiography, 1960-1980," *Acadiensis* XXX, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 45-9.

29 Kenneth Windsor, 1933-1979, was a professor of history at the University of New Brunswick. Professors Windsor and Vigod died in road accidents some nine years apart.

ERF: Well, we could mention losses at that point because in losing Ken we lost a dependable supporter. And losing Bernie [Vigod] was tragic and I mean tragic on a personal basis and tragic for us professionally because he was just coming into his own as an administrator, as a scholar – tremendous potential.

ACAD: So there was a real sense of team work?

ERF: Camaraderie. I like to think of the Nova Scotia archives gang, going forward from the mid-1960s. It began in 1965-1966. In the summers that we were doing research, we would work in the Nova Scotia archives for a while then we would take breaks and sit out on the archives steps and discuss what we were finding or what we had found that somebody else could use. It was a cooperative effort right from the very beginning. Colin Howell³⁰ would come up saying “Well, I found stuff on Fielding,” or he’d run into stuff that was useful on the 1920s. It was very comfortable but thought-provoking. I mean, that’s where the ideas germinated – on the archives steps [laughs]. When I was getting ready to leave Victoria the first time, when Sydney Pettit couldn’t talk me out of it, he said “Look, are there any other Nova Scotians or [other] Maritimers that we can hire out here?” I thought of those that were sitting on the archive steps and pulled out the name of Don Chard.³¹ They hired him! And Marg Conrad³² was working more in Ottawa but was very much part of the gang, and Judy Fingard was at the core of social history in Halifax.³³ There are other names I should be mentioning, but I always thought of it as a team right from when we started. To use a term George Rawlyk used to talk about a lot, we had “a sense of mission.” Later on the SSHRCC [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada] would call for the development of teams and they would call for the use of new technology and I would look around me and argue that we already had 90 per cent of what they seemed to be talking about back then.

ACAD: A camaraderie that united archives, universities, museums, among people of like mind?

ERF: [In the archives], we realized that some very skillful people are framing what we use, and making it easier, clearer, and that in the development of a regional history approach they bought into it wholeheartedly I thought. Marion Beyea³⁴ I would mention in particular. She was the one that innovated, created The Associates of the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick as a promotional organization and its journal, *Silhouettes*. Marion had me going all the time with new ideas and if there was an obstacle you just found your way around it.

ACAD: The role of historians who practised in museums?

ERF: Absolutely. When I was finishing up my master’s thesis and came down to Dalhousie to defend it, on the board was Murray Beck and I was introduced to Del

30 Colin D. Howell is a professor emeritus of history at Saint Mary’s University.

31 Donald F. Chard teaches history at Saint Mary’s University.

32 Margaret R. Conrad is honorary research professor at the University of New Brunswick. See also Margaret Conrad, “It was All about Me: Making History Relevant,” *Canadian Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (December 2011): 694-721.

33 Judith Fingard is an adjunct professor, formerly a professor of history, at Dalhousie University.

34 Marion Beyea is provincial archivist and director of the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick.

[Muise],³⁵ who was at Dalhousie on a fellowship. We did the usual amount of fencing that goes on in such exams but then afterwards we met for supper and discussed what we were doing, how we were doing it, and have been in close contact ever since. And of course when Del went [from the National Museum of Man] more directly into the teaching side, Peter Rider³⁶ carried on. We were fortunate to have someone else interested in defending the interests of the region, and the interpretations of the region, in strategic places.

ACAD: Well, here were people such as yourself and others you've mentioned who were determined that Maritime or Atlantic Canadian historical experiences should be part of the mainstream. There are others, some of them the same people, who believed that working class history seen through a Marxist methodology should be part of mainstream. There are others yet, and again some of them the same people, who were determined that women's history should take its proper place and then again there were others still who believed that Aboriginal history, African Nova Scotian history, and other ethnic experiences should be part of the mainstream. Now are we, from your perspective looking back on it, looking at one historical movement or are they several that just happen to be pushing in some of the same directions?

ERF: I think there was [that] sense of camaraderie. Some were suggesting Marxist theory was the best way to understand the region. Others were preoccupied with metropolitanism. I think you have a regional approach, a regional perspective. I remember a conference at which I gave a paper on historiography.³⁷ Murray Beck gave a powerful defence of the provincial approach, but it seemed like, the conference – just the way it worked out – there would be one of them talking region and then another would be talking province, and perhaps there was a little argument and I wound up sort of giving a defence of region I think, as I recall. I got credit for that. I think I said elsewhere, when you say what other people are thinking you are deemed to be very wise. [But] I guess the question you should be asking me is “How did you get involved in women's history?”

ACAD: How did you get involved in women's history?

ERF: Well, in Roger Graham's seminar at Queen's Roger had a list of topics that he wanted us to explore. He gave us a good deal of choice. But one of them was feminism, and he looked at me: feminists in the Maritimes or something like that. And I thought about the amount of research one would have to do to get even a little information, and I said no to Roger. But I still had in the back of mind I wanted to do something for Roger, if you will, and so after I had got safely off on prohibition and Maritime Rights, [and] my colleagues were talking about a festschrift in honour

35 D.A. (Del) Muise is a professor emeritus of history at Carleton University.

36 Peter E. Rider is Atlantic Provinces historian and curator at the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

37 The Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, spring 1978, met in conjunction with the Western Canadian Studies Conference in sessions held in Calgary and Fredericton. Selected papers, including those by Forbes and Beck, were published in David Jay Bercuson and Phillip A. Buckner, *Eastern and Western Perspectives: Papers from the Joint Atlantic Canada/Western Canadian Studies Conference* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

of him, I thought I would try to do my paper for the festschrift on the history of feminism in the Maritimes. But then I was talking to Marg Conrad and she [also] wanted me to do a paper on feminism in the Maritimes and I promised. Then when we were preparing for the festschrift I found I stole all the material from one paper for the other, so I had to tell her that I just didn't have enough for two papers, barely enough for one and she let me off. So she sounded me out on just what I had found, and what I had found was a bit contrary to the conventional wisdom on the conservative Maritimes. And she said "Have you seen the new book by Carol Bacchi,"³⁸ and I said "No." She kind of grinned and she said "Would you consider doing a review on it, and if you do a review on it then I won't hold you to your promise for the paper?" So I said "Sure," but I found out the reason for her grin when I read the book, because the book was pretty directly contrary to what I was beginning to argue at the time. In fact as I got into it I got more and more enthusiastic and came out with a paper, which in retrospect I should have tried to soften a bit at least because, as my son James said, "What did she ever do to you that you wrote a paper like that? That's out of character." Anyway, I did get interested in it. I don't know – it was perhaps an indication of my own insecurity in feeling that I was challenging a group of women's historians and wondering how I would be received.³⁹

ACAD: And how were you received?

ERF: Surprisingly well. I was [in Ottawa] working on two papers at the same time. I was spending the day working on freight rates or whatever it was I was doing in the [National] Archives, and in the evening I worked in the National Library on the feminist paper. You had a locker in the archives, but in the library you had a piece of shelf space with your name on it. I came down one evening and clearly somebody had been into my books and papers and on the top was a note. Circle, arrow, and, "Right on sister!" [laughs].

ACAD: You served a term on the council of the CHA. What was that like?

ERF: Well, a fair amount of work. The time I went on it they had created a bunch of portfolios. And as I didn't really know too much what was going on at the time they were very apologetic – they didn't have a portfolio for me. They said I could work for another historian on one of the portfolios, but the next year it meant that I had the senior portfolio of publication. This included the booklets and, well, it was the heaviest portfolio. What did I do? Well I read and edited pamphlets and papers, of course! I recall it as being very busy [and] I remember it as a positive experience in

38 Carol Lee Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred: The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983).

39 The review essay appears as Ernest Forbes, "The Ideas of Carol Bacchi and the Suffragists of Halifax: A Review Essay on *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918*, University of Toronto Press, 1983," *Atlantis* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 119-26; it was reprinted in E.R. Forbes, *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1989), 90-9. The Graham festschrift never reached publication, but the essay was published as "Battles in Another War: Edith Archibald and the Halifax Feminist Movement," in Forbes, *Challenging the Regional Stereotype*, 67-89.

which I felt that the interests of the region were being served. Certainly we held our own. Phil Buckner had the academic politics figured out, and at a department meeting about 1979 he gave us a sermon on the text that it was not sufficient to do our own work but to defend the regional approach we had to occupy – early Occupiers, eh!⁴⁰ – our share of the national committees. By then I had finished my thesis, turned it into a book, and secured a grant for the next project. My colleagues were waiting impatiently for me to grow up. So this is why I couldn't say no when they kept piling stuff on. Anyway, about the same time I was on the board of *Canadian Historical Review* – the editors were David Bercuson⁴¹ and Jack Granatstein.⁴² One of my first publications [had been] with Bercuson as editor, that was the railway article.⁴³ There were some lively exchanges and tensions on that board, not least about issues such as what constituted a paper of national significance, and on the balance of authority between the editors and the board. I also served a term on the Aid to Scholarly Publications committee,⁴⁴ where a disproportionate number of Atlantic Provinces manuscripts showed up [applying for publication subsidies] in the period that I was there but where also a disproportionate share of the problem cases concerned Atlantic Provinces writers. The central bias was not malicious, not even conscious I'm sure, but you needed to have your people on the committee. It was really a matter of good people making a reasonable system work, and they did, but whatever the reason I wound up on a lot of committees.

ACAD: A fair amount of what you have done as a historian, and your essay in *Canada and the Burden of Unity* is one good example, has had implications not just for history but also for public policy issues. The other example, really major example among others, is “Consolidating Disparity.”⁴⁵ You are a historian who has had a lot to say about federalism and the way it continues to impact the Maritimes. Do you feel that that side of your scholarship has ever really had the recognition it deserves?

ERF: I've used terms like “unequal union” to talk about federalism, or God being on the side of the big battalions, but one has to be aware that in politics you give the advantage to the big provinces and we worked out a system that perpetuates that and we in the Maritimes have to run a little faster to stay still. The rules are made for the big provinces and they're changed as the game goes on. So I've tried to point that out, but it doesn't change much. I hoped that it would provide a little understanding or help provide a little understanding of the way the federal system works. It's not malicious, but we are and have been in a relatively weak position in the federal union. How you improve it – that I don't know.

40 This is a reference to the Occupy movement of 2011-12.

41 David J. Bercuson is a professor of history at the University of Calgary.

42 J.L. (Jack) Granatstein is a distinguished research professor of history emeritus at York University.

43 Forbes, “Misguided Symmetry.”

44 The Aid to Scholarly Publications program is administered by the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, <http://www.fedcan.ca/content/en/576/ASPP/>.

45 Ernest R. Forbes, “Consolidating Disparity: The Maritimes and the Industrialization of Canada during the Second World War,” *Acadiensis* XV, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 3-27.

ACAD: You have that brief moment in the late 1950s that Margaret Conrad has written about when the provincial governments really did come together and make some pretty effective noise and yet if you go a generation later, to the 1980s when Sydney Steel was on its last legs, why wasn't Premier Buchanan out saying, "Read Ernie Forbes and you'll find out why we need to take an aggressive line with this"? But as historians it's very difficult for us to have that kind of impact.

ERF: No, I guess we can blame ourselves a bit for not teaching them better [laughs].

ACAD: Looking back over your career and the people you have mentioned as your colleagues who set out in the 1960s and 1970s to make a difference in terms of the understanding of Maritime and Atlantic Canadian history, do you think it has been a successful enterprise?

ERF: Successful enterprise? Well, yes it has in the sense that we have not gone back as far as we would have if we had not engaged in the struggle. And that's not as encouraging as we would like, but realistically when we get into a contest with say Quebec or much less Ontario we can't expect to win.

ACAD: So the struggle has had some success. Are you glad you decided to become part of it, to make that change from potential classics teacher to being Ernie Forbes the Maritime historian?

ERF: Oh, quite happy and quite surprised. I was moving tenants into a cottage down near Halifax, on the one end of the sofa, and one of the student tenants was on the other end and he says, "Are you THE Ernie Forbes?" And I said "Oh, yes, of course!" [laughs].

ACAD: Thank you.