

# What Spines to Crack, What Leaves to Thumb! On Uncovering Black History in Atlantic Canada, from Cover to Cover

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# What Spines to Crack, What Leaves to Thumb! On Uncovering Black History in Atlantic Canada, from Cover to Cover

WHILE A TEEN LAD, AND THEN A YOUNG MAN, JUST 18, I heard little about African-Nova Scotian – or Africadian – history and roots and culture. The great radical striver for justice, Dr. Burnley “Rocky” Jones, had imparted some info – as had his cousin and my mentor, Walter M. Borden, the poet, playwright, actor, and newspaper editor. But I’d not really read anything except – at age 13 or so – the school-distributed *Pictorial on Black History: Nova Scotia* (issued by the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission in 1973), which presented one-page, synoptic bios of heroes like boxer Sam Langford and singer Portia White (whom I knew was my late great aunt) – all illustrated by the lush, plush inks of artist Ken Pinto. Purposefully, the gallery of exemplary Africadians could not compose – or impose – a philosophical interpretation of our “national” history or cultural and other endeavours, eh?

Now that was a problem, for in the 1970s, sayeth scholars far and wide, Africadians were a lot of sorry failures, as attested to by the tome of Winks (1971) and the slimmer volume of Henry (1973), plus Clairmont and Magill’s sociological analysis of the bulldozer-cleared Africville (1974). Even the progressive thesis of Walker (1976) – i.e., that the Black arrivants of 1783 were not a simple rabble but were in pursuit of their very own Canaan – still identified the truly heroic “Black Loyalist Scotians” as those who’d sailed off to Sierra Leone in 1792. William Spray’s *The Blacks in New Brunswick* (1972) was empathetic – but more anecdotal than scholarly. Frank Stanley Boyd’s and Mary I. Allen Boyd’s epic, Pan-Africanist-inspired footnotes to their edited 1976 reissue of McKerrow’s 1895 classic, *History of the Coloured Baptists*, constituted a lonely outlier to the academic chorus of denunciation – or nullification.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1971; 3rd ed. 2021, with an introduction by George Elliott Clarke); Frances Henry, *Forgotten Canadians: The Blacks of Nova Scotia* (Don Mills, ON: Longman, 1973); Donald H. Clairmont and Dennis Magill, *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community* (1974; Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 1999); James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (London: Longman and Dalhousie University Press, 1976); William A. Spray, *The Blacks in*

So, had I steeped myself in most of the materials available to me as a teen, I would have read mere highfalutin' reruns of Thomas Chandler Haliburton's racist denigrations (pun intended) of ex-slaves as being no better than slaves, who really desired to return to slavery. Arguably, professional Maritime historians of Africadians seemed overly impressed by pro-slavery Judge Haliburton's damning observations in his two-volume history of Nova Scotia (1829) and his curmudgeonly "Sam Slick" sketches (1835-40).<sup>2</sup> Thus these similar intellectuals pooh-pooed the ingenuity of a few thousand stranded, abandoned, mainly African Americans, who survived the barrens and all the scarcities and all the inclement conditions (illiteracy, intolerance, over-policing, and under-employment) of the Maritimes – an economically depressed (some say "backward") region of Canada – to create their own culture and indigenous speech, and, mixing with Cherokee and Mi'kmaq (and possibly Maliseet and Passamaquoddy), to produce a hybrid, Afro-Métis populace too. *I know*: I am one.

Yet, because I took the advice of Rocky – and then-wife Joan – to locomotive to the University of Waterloo in August 1979 and commence studies toward a BA in (Black Canadian) history, *via* courses taught by James Walker (courses I did not take – ultimately – because I majored in English), I ended up, a 19-year-old in southern Ontario, that autumn, feeling irrepressibly homesick – nostalgic – for Sweet Home Nova Scotia. To salve my plight, I hied myself to the Dana Porter Arts Library – a ten-storey, white, precast-concrete cube (slashed with hundreds of rectangular windows) that resembled a shotgun marriage of Speer and Gaudí – and there I ransacked every book that I could find on Black Nova Scotia, the Black North Atlantic, and the Black Maritimes. To do so, I shuttled among sociology and social work and history. Now, at long last, I was getting educated in my region, my "race," myself. It was a visionary revision.

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*New Brunswick* (Fredericton: Brunswick Press, 1972; rpt. Fredericton: Brunswick Press, 2021, with foreword by Thandiwe McCarthy and preface by Funké Aladejebi); Frank Stanley Boyd and Mary I. Allen Boyd, *McKerrow: A Brief History of the Coloured Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1783-1895* (Halifax: Afro Nova Scotian Enterprises, 1976). I must also mention Pearleen Oliver's own significant follow-up to McKerrow's original *A Brief History of the Coloured Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1783-1895, and Their First Organization as Churches, A.D. 1832* (Halifax: Nova Scotia Printing Company, 1895) – namely, *A Brief History of the Colored Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1782-1953* (Halifax: [African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia], 1953). However, I did not encounter that vital text until the mid-1990s and did not read it until December 2019. If I had read it as a teen, I would have recognized it as being at least a partial retort to the white-authored histories available up to 1953.

2 Thomas Chandler Haliburton, *An Historical and Statistical Account of Nova Scotia in Two Volumes* (Halifax, 1829); Thomas Chandler Haliburton, *The Clockmaker: The Sayings and Doings of Sam Slick of Slickville* (Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2007).

Truly, I began to see myself, not only as a subject in history, subjected to historical processes, but also as a subject worthy of history, who had a history credible for magic realist mythologizing. I picked up the booklet *Condition of the Negroes of Halifax City* (1962), and I saw Maynard Street – my childhood street – named.<sup>3</sup> So, even if the authors were pointing out the *relative* poverty of our households (perhaps even mine – at 2357 Maynard), that our neighbours and we had occasioned professorial examination – even if not dissimilar to that afforded lab rats – registered still our status as meaningful. I read – and reviewed for my student newspaper – Clairmont and Magill's *Africville* (1974), and revisited (or experienced vicariously) that welfare-reform would-be Marshall Plan, but one designed diabolically by Machiavelli. Pondering Boyd's edition of McKerrow, plus Walker's depiction of Black Loyalists, I found Muses for what became prize-winning poetry about the African (United) Baptist Association (AUBA) of Nova Scotia. (Cue my *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues*, 1983; then again, even my forthcoming *Canticles III* explores AUBA history, some 40 years after my tyro attempt.) Furthermore, now that Africadians are increasingly authoring our own history, its complexion has changed; it be somewhat sunnier, but not whitewash.

Every bibliography is either a yellow-brick-road to Oz (or self-deception) or a road to Damascus (or revolutionary Enlightenment). Upon entering this Africadian history bibliography, one need not abandon "hope." Nope! Just the blinkered purview of stereotype.

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

Natif de Windsor, en Nouvelle-Écosse (dans une région côtière qu'il appelle « Africadia »), **GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE** a exploré l'histoire et la culture de la population d'ascendance africaine des Maritimes dans les travaux d'érudition ainsi que dans le théâtre, la poésie, les livrets d'opéra, les romans, les scénarios et les chansons. Il a enseigné aux universités Duke, McGill, de la Colombie-Britannique, Harvard et de Toronto, où il est présentement professeur titulaire de la chaire de littérature canadienne E.J. Pratt. Il possède une propriété à Three Mile Plains, en Nouvelle-Écosse, une communauté historique noire.

A native of Windsor, Nova Scotia (part of a landscape/seascape that he dubs "Africadia"), **GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE** has explored the history and culture of Afro-Maritimers in scholarship as well as in plays, poetry, opera libretti, novels, screenplays, and song. He has taught at Duke, McGill, UBC, Harvard, and Toronto, where he is currently the E.J. Pratt Professor of Canadian Literature. He owns property in Three Mile Plains, Nova Scotia, a historic Black community.

3 Dalhousie University Institute of Public Affairs, *The Condition of the Negroes of Halifax City, Nova Scotia: A Study* (Halifax: Dalhousie University Institute of Public Affairs, 1962), [https://www.halifax.ca/sites/default/files/documents/about-the-city/archives/305.8.C-1962\\_ConditionOfNegroesOfHalifax.pdf](https://www.halifax.ca/sites/default/files/documents/about-the-city/archives/305.8.C-1962_ConditionOfNegroesOfHalifax.pdf).