

## Fort, Fog and Fiddlehead: Some New Atlantic Writing

Malcolm Ross

Volume 3, numéro 2, spring 1974

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad3\\_2rv04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad3_2rv04)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

### ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce compte rendu

Ross, M. (1974). Compte rendu de [Fort, Fog and Fiddlehead:: Some New Atlantic Writing]. *Acadiensis*, 3(2), 116–121.

gate mortgaging in Toronto Gore Township. His results are even more important to economic historians than to social historians, a fact which again suggests the efficacy of collaborative and co-operative efforts. J. M. S. Careless outlines an analytical framework for the study of Ontario urbanization, a framework whose value will be determined in Careless' forthcoming study of Canadian urbanization. Unfortunately, there are too many essays (nineteen) to outline all of them. Several, it should be noted, were written by amateur historians, a group to which professional historians in Ontario owe a great deal. Of the articles by non-historians, James Reaney's study of myths in some nineteenth-century Ontario newspapers is the most promising and the most disappointing. Surely the artist who explored so brilliantly the mythic and moral dimensions of the Donnelly tragedy could have given us more than a newspaper miscellany.

In reading the book, one is reminded of Richard Hofstadter's description of the growth of complexity in American historiography since the 1950's: "an engaging and moving simplicity, accessible to the casual reader of history has given way to a new awareness of the multiplicity of forces".<sup>25</sup> Clearly, Ontario history is now in the middle stage of such a transformation when generalizations of the past are being modified or abandoned and the faint outlines of an intricate synthesis are emerging. Esthetically, this particular stage is unattractive, since its history tends to be monographic, highly specific, and, if compared to the earlier narrative stage, rather dull. Consequently, many general readers may be disappointed. On the other hand, the new techniques, the novel subjects, and the inchoate syntheses will fascinate the professional historian. In its recognition of the continuity of historical research in Ontario, *Aspects of Nineteenth Century Ontario* is a reassuring work. As Ontario history moves towards a greater complexity and sophistication, one has confidence that it will embrace neither sterile revisionism nor narrow positivism.

JOHN ENGLISH

#### **FORT, FOG AND FIDDLEHEAD: SOME NEW ATLANTIC WRITING**

How often, in despair of locating "the specifically Canadian quality" in the work of writers as diverse as Morley Callaghan, Irving Layton, Margaret Laurence and E. J. Pratt, we have taken to talking of "writing in Canada" instead of "Canadian writing". And have not some of us some of the time been half-willing to allow that "Canadian literature" is really nothing more than a loose aggregate of regional literatures — West Coast, Maritime, Ontario, Prairie, Quebec — each with its own unmistakable and non-transferable,

25 Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians* (New York, 1970), p. 442.

finger-print, birth-mark and blood-type? But surely there can be no trouble in locating "the specifically Atlantic quality" of a batch of stories and poems, in several volumes, from the Maritime provinces and Newfoundland. All fort, fog and fiddlehead, it might be supposed! But as an old unreconstructed Maritimer, back at last from the long night of wandering in the Great Ontario Desert, I find the task not easy at all. To begin with — "Atlantic Canada" is a dreadful Ottawese neologism concocted to take account of Joey Smallwood and his mighty deed, and the subsequent and consequent reincarnation of Jack Pickersgill as old salt and sea dog.

The editors of the several volumes at hand are themselves by no means unaware of the difficulty in locating the birth-mark, finger-print and blood-type of the literature of this single and singular region of the Canadian aggregate of regions.<sup>1</sup> Allan Graham, editor of the P.E.I. Centennial collection *Island Prose and Poetry*, perhaps in a fit of perplexity, makes short work of the issue of identity. "Someone", he avers, "is sure to ask — 'What is an Islander?' Good question! In this anthology it is understood to mean a person who was born on the Island or one who did a large amount of his or her writing in P.E.I." (p. 1). Straightforward and simple enough! But how many of us had known that Edgar McInnes, for instance, was, by birth, an Islander? And by Mr. Graham's criteria we could claim Saul Bellow as a Montrealer, Wyndham Lewis as a Nova Scotian. And did not Willa Cather write her best novels while living on another of our islands — Grand Manan? I think everyone knows that Basil King was born and bred in P.E.I. But why is he represented in a Centennial Anthology by a story set in the Adirondacks of New York State?

There are fine things in Mr. Graham's collection, and my queries so far have not been about choices but about the elusive business of birth-mark and finger-print. Can it be that the specifically Maritime, even the specifically P.E.I., is as difficult to detect as the specifically Canadian?

But before going on to the other books, I must commend Mr. Graham for including specimens of Island writing in French and Gaelic. (Is it, perhaps, that the authentic Maritime culture is tri-lingual? Lister Sinclair forgot that down here we have not two but three founding races!) Then, too, the Island anthology has, in the midst of much that is merely conventional and put in, I suppose, out of patriotic piety, a fine prose passage by the artist Robert Harris, and an astonishing sea-narrative by the nineteenth-century worthy John Hunter-Duvar (who sometimes strikes, even if he does not for long sus-

1 Robert Cockburn and Robert Gibbs, eds., *Ninety Seasons: Modern Poetry from the Maritimes* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1974); Kent Thompson, ed., *Stories from Atlantic Canada* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1973); Donald Cameron, ed., *Voices Down East: A Collection of New Writing from the Atlantic Provinces* (Halifax, *The 4th Estate*, 1973); Allen Graham, ed., *Island Prose and Poetry: An Anthology* (Charlottetown, The Centennial Commission Literary Committee, 1973).

tain, the humorous-heroic key of Ned Pratt's *The Cachalot*). And among the new Island writers there is, of course, Milton Acorn and a remarkable newcomer, Michael Wayne Wright, who seems to sing with his eyes and see with his lips.

There are few Islanders who will admit to any cultural truck and trade with the mainland. The mainlander Kent Thompson was honestly unable to find a short story writer who might decently represent the Island in *Stories from Atlantic Canada*. And so with P.E.I. out and Newfoundland in, Thompson tries to find the tie that binds in a recognizable regional knot, yarns by C.G.D. Roberts, Thomas Raddall, Al Pittman, Beth Harvor, Alden Nowlan, Charles Bruce, Ray Smith and a score of others from worlds as various as Apahoquai and Napadogan, Musquodoboit, Tantramar and Come-by-Chance. We are therefore neither surprised nor enlightened when we read that our region "is characterized chiefly by diversity" (p. ix).

It was A.G. Bailey who first alerted us, to "the social and geographical particularism of the Maritimes", a particularism accentuated in New Brunswick "where the inhabitants of each river valley tended to develop a life of their own". For example, "the settlements of the North Shore until a comparatively recent date had few intimate contacts with those of the Bay of Fundy."<sup>2</sup>If this be so, consider the light years of space-time thought that stretch between galaxies so apart and afar as Caraquet and Maguadavic, or Bocabec and Tatamagouche.

And yet, for the life of me, I refuse (as I know Bailey refuses) to be a geographical historical and cultural nominalist, despite the very real particularism of Maritime life and growth. Kent Thompson is surely right in sensing something in the region as a region, a region conceived as a substantial whole and not just as an accidental accumulation of particles and particulars, something, even if quite impossible of definition, which is not to be found in "With-It Vancouver or High-Rise Toronto" (p. xi). Thompson is right in stressing the concern with history which is evident still in the Maritimes. "Where else in Canada", he asks us, "is it true that the names you read in the morning paper are so often the names of your friends, and those are the same names you find attached to streets, towns and crossroads — names that stretch back through graveyards to political events and even battles" (p. xi). Donald Cameron, too, in his preface to *Voices Down East*, has some awareness of the peculiar presence here of past time. But it is Gibbs and Cockburn, in *Ninety Seasons: Modern Poetry from the Maritimes*, who have the best sense of the Maritimer as a kind of walking paradox. Radio, television, advertising "have done their work here, for the younger Maritimer is no longer a very distinctive personality; he may speak of 'Upper Canada' but will closely resemble

2 "Creative Moments in the Maritime Provinces", *Culture and Nationality* (Toronto, 1972), p. 53.

his Ontario counterpart. Or his contemporary, say, in Arizona" (p. 12). And yet our writers, no matter how young and TV taught and twisted, draw still on the past, on our sea-girt body of myth. We are still more likely than most English-Canadians "to people our landscapes with ghosts or with the living" (p. 13). We seem to "have come to terms with our place and our past more freely than Canadians elsewhere" (p. 13).

Gibbs and Cockburn make good these claims in the poems they have chosen for *Ninety Seasons*. It is in A. G. Bailey more than anyone else here that the passion of the past made present is most powerfully realized. His "Angel Gabriel" is an instance of this and one can only regret that his "Confederation Debate" and recent pieces in this same vein were not included by the editors. For Bailey, like Thomas Raddall in his story "At the Tide's Turn" in the Kent Thompson book (and, of course, in his major novel *His Majesty's Yankees*), catches and recreates the half-forgotten love-hate dimension of our New England connection. For once upon a time there was a region that reached from Boston to the Bay of Chaleur. It was a region of the mind that over-arched all the political fences and fusses. As one born and bred in the region, I never thought it strange that I was as much at home in Scituate or Skowhegan as in Chamcook, Shediac or Nashwaaksis. And not at home at all in such foreign towns as Newark, N.J. and Toronto, Ont.

But the political fences, for all this, were never really down. I remember bragging to my Yankee cousins about all those red patches on the world map where the Union Jack flew and the sun never set. And we fought daily about "who won the war". How well I remember, all the way from Fredericton, cheering on the Bluenose against the schooner out of Gloucester, and cheering on Charlie Gorman of Saint John against the skaters of all the world — not just from Bangor and Boston but from the really foreign places too — Helsinki, Lake Placid, Winnipeg, Toronto. I have a hunch that while the people of each river valley had a life of their own (there were Scots valleys and Yorkshire valleys and Acadian valleys), and while they talked a different talk and sang their different songs, they were much more alike than they looked or ever cared to admit — and all because of New England, because they all bounced off Boston in about the same way. They were alike in what they had from New England and in what they had against it. Perhaps this is why we are Maritimers and not just valley men, or Fundy men or South Shore men.

Radio, television and advertising have not yet altogether undone us. We still people our varied landscapes "with ghosts or with the living". In the poems and stories of Nowlan, Gibbs and Buckler, for example, place is drenched with lived time. In writers like Charles Bruce with his wonderful salt-encrusted human ships and shores, in the multi-dimensional personal and interior landscapes of Fred Cogswell, in the sharp visual plain song of Elizabeth Brewster and Robert Cockburn, the particularism of place is not yet

lost nor is that homeliness of tone with which we are wont to touch both the living and the dead. It is this homeliness, and it is our knowledge that a boat, a bridge or an old fence can have a history big enough to put a battle to blush, which keeps us part of that region of the mind where Robert Frost still presides and political fences and fusses have no force. But it is a good while now since all roads led to Boston and since the entire population of Massachusetts was made up of uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters of lads from Fredericton, Charlottetown and Halifax. When we go down the road nowadays, it is not to Boston but to Toronto. The Boston boat has gone and the Boston train. And there have been Senator Joe McCarthy, Vietnam, Watergate to make Vancouver nearer to us than Vanceboro, Maine, in spirit and in truth. True, Bob Gibbs does not write like a Toronto man and never will. There is a mark — a special mark — on the writing of Gibbs and Nowlan and Bailey and Buckler and Raddall. It is our mark. And it is the special mark we make on writing in Canada. But is it merely the lagging leftover of a cultural moment that is passing or has passed?

I am disquieted when I think twice of Kent Thompson's belief (which I share) that "there is a different quality of life here than there is in With-It Vancouver or High-Rise Toronto". For the High-Rise has come already to Halifax and the developers, sometimes with the benediction of men whose names "stretch back through graveyards to political events and even battles", are striking flat for a fast buck the last outward and visible signs of our passion of the past. In Province House and on the hustings the cry is "Forward" — on to that brave new world of super-port and oil spill, with off-shore the nuclear island, and on-shore the twelve-lane highway obliterating the village and valley it takes the tourist to. Perhaps in the lovely region stretching from Boston to the Bay Chaleur, every building ever built to human size will go down at last before the Wrecker Progress. And the last weird battle of the liberal west will be over with and won.

Now, of course, I do not believe a word of what I have just said (except in those rare moments when I am really thinking hard). Anyhow, I keep remembering that mark, that indelible Maritime mark, made so long ago we Maritimers have forgotten how it was made. But there it still is — on the brow of Bailey and Raddall and Milton Acorn — on very young poets like Michael Wayne Wright — on "incomers" like Robert Cockburn (from New York and Maine) and John Thompson (from England). Indeed, if we squint narrowly enough at Maritime writers who have come to us all the way from Talahasse or Toronto, we can sometimes see, just after their ninth month here, the hint and halo of the Mark. I am therefore in no wise distressed to find among the contributors to Donald Cameron's *Voice Down East*, writers who hail from Kentucky, Pennsylvania and Vermont, not to mention a whole raft of them who seem to have come to us from out of Nowhere ("Hatti Prentiss lives with her husband, three dogs and four cats . . . on the edge of

the ocean at East Lawrencetown, N.S.” — “Elaine Harrison lives in a lovely corner of P.E.I. right on a cliff . . .” [p. 48]). Whither all such — and whence? *Voices Down East* teems with authors whose place of origin is hushed up or hidden. But what of it? Let us suppose that Elaine Harrison (who lives right on a cliff) actually came to us from Kalamazoo (it is quite possible, of course, that she did not). And let us suppose that all the other authors of dark and dubious origin in Cameron’s book came way down east from very far west. What of it? Here they are — and we have now only to wait for the Mark to shape and show.

Cameron has included a few writers who appeared in the other books I have been talking about — among them Nowlan, Buckler, Horwood. There is a remarkable contingent of young poets from Newfoundland. And Cameron introduces us to a brilliant short-story writer, Andrew Wetmore, who “came to Halifax from Digby via New York and Montreal” (p. 47). His piece “The Railway Station” gives an authentic effect of place, our kind of place, but utterly transfigured by a wry flick of the imagination. The Mark is clear and strong on Wetmore’s brow.

Donald Cameron tells us he solicited some of the material for the book and advertised in Atlantic newspapers for the rest. I am not sure that he solicited nearly enough or rejected enough, either. But we can be grateful for Karen Casselman, Elaine Harrison, Al Pittman, John Hornby, Mary Kanner, to mention only a few on whom the Mark begins to show. Most of all we can be grateful for the proof that Cameron’s book gives us that there is a very fury of creative activity going on in these parts, on farms, on fishing boats, on lake-shore and seaside and on the very edge of a cliff!

The young Maritimer, whether Maritimer by birth or by conversion, may seem to resemble his counterpart in Ontario or in Arizona. Certainly he is more the Canadian now and less the New Englander. But if he stays for a spell in one of Bailey’s river valleys or along the Fundy or in Lunenburg or Fredericton or Annapolis Royal, he will be Canadian with a difference. For he surely will wear the Mark. And I have a hunch that if he has come to us from Talahassee or Tennessee or even from the Great Ontario Desert, he will battle the Wrecker and the Developer with a zeal too often lacking in folk whose names “stretch back through graveyards to political events and even battles”.

For it may be that only the incomer, the new man with our ancient Mark upon him, will be able to reveal to us out of a wisdom of our own which we have now forgotten, that prosperity and progress are not made out of self-destruction, and that Chicago, Detroit, Jersey City, Hoboken and even Hamilton, Ont. look nothing at all like the New Jerusalem.