

In Search of the Massachusetts - Nova Scotia Dynamic

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Reviews/Revues

In Search of the Massachusetts - Nova Scotia Dynamic

George Rawlyk has hit upon the rather novel idea of studying the relations between two colonial neighbors, Nova Scotia and Massachusetts,¹ whose histories, both in colonial times and since, have intersected at a number of points. The story is made more interesting by the fact that Nova Scotia was at first Acadia, a French outpost and symbol, close at hand, of the dark and sinister forces of Catholicism against which New England's Puritans stood most firmly opposed. Diplomatic and military encounters between the two were inevitable but despite them, the people of Massachusetts were unenthusiastic, even hostile, to any notions of expansion. Private interests periodically stirred Massachusetts into direct interference in Nova Scotian affairs since, whether under French governance or English, it was almost completely an economic appendage. But generally, Rawlyk tells us, Massachusetts looked upon its tiny northern neighbor — with at best one fifteenth of its population — as cold and forbidding and its government, by the 1750s and 60s, as unattractively Anglophile, commercial, military, and elitist. Massachusetts, it would seem, struck upon the "open door policy" 150 years early.

For the most part, Rawlyk's is a study of military events strung together by a loose thread of interpretation that stresses rather vaguely discerned Massachusetts attitudes and concerns about its northern neighbor. Thus in place of John Bartlet Brebner's thesis that the events of the 1750s and 60s — the expulsion of the Acadians and the influx of New England settlers into Nova Scotia — were the logical culmination of the numerous Massachusetts military thrusts northward,² Rawlyk leaves us with the fragments: genuine fears about French invasion at times, narrow dreams of British imperialism at others, but certainly no long-range, coherent policy. In fact, almost overmodestly, Rawlyk creates the impression that his story is rather unimportant, that Massachusetts' relations with Nova Scotia were of little consequence compared with the grand roles Massachusetts played in the American Revolution or in the great American imperial thrust, first into Canada and then into the American West. Nova Scotia, so it seems, fell outside the mainstream of Massachusetts history. Is this the best we can do in uncovering the Massachusetts-Nova Scotia dynamic?

Material suggesting the need for a revision of eighteenth-century Massachusetts-Nova Scotian history has been accumulating since the 1960s. A number of mutually reinforcing local studies undertaken by Kenneth Lockridge, J. M. Bumsted, Edward M. Cook, Jr., Philip Greven, David Grayson Allen, and others have shown that long established farming communities, for

1 George A. Rawlyk, *Nova Scotia's Massachusetts: A Study of Massachusetts-Nova Scotia Relations, 1630 to 1784* (Montreal and London, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973).

2 John Bartlet Brebner, *The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia* (New York, 1937).

the most part in the eastern part of Massachusetts, but also elsewhere in New England, were undergoing a crisis by the second quarter of the century.³ Land had been subdivided by successive generations of farmers until the point had finally been reached when farming units were verging on subsistence-level, land values were being forced beyond the means of most men, and thus almost an entire generation found itself searching for a place in a suddenly topsy-turvy world. For some, the answer was simple: migration to new communities on the frontier. But as Kenneth Lockridge has pointed out, most young men seemed reluctant to leave their hometowns: the pull of the extended family was as strong as it had ever been in a Puritan society.⁴ Some therefore became farm laborers and others artisans, thereby contributing to an economic diversification and a growing commercialization of their towns. Some, as J. M. Bumsted suggests, turned to religion as the Great Awakening burned its way over New England in the 1740s.⁵ Others, of course, simply became drifters, posing a constant threat to the traditional New England social order and testing the ability of local authorities to maintain the highly valued harmony and peace of their communities. Even towns where land depletion was not extensive, such as in Worcester County, found themselves "warning out" more than four times as many indigents in the period from 1754 to 1767 than they had in the previous 17 years.⁶

What to do with a footloose generation? The problem is not an unfamiliar one in our own time, with its student loans, government-sponsored youth hostels, and its Opportunities for Youth. In colonial times the answer was different, but surely it is no accident that the crisis in the farming areas was closely paralleled by a marked increase in Massachusetts' involvement in imperial military adventures, beginning with Carthegena in 1740, then Louisbourg in 1745, Kennebec in 1754, Chignecto, Virginia, Crown Point, Ticonderoga, Louisbourg, Quebec, and Montreal. Massachusetts, of course, did not begin the wars with France that account for so many military opportuni-

3 Kenneth Lockridge, "Land, Population, and the Evolution of New England Society, 1630-1790," *Past and Present*, no. 39 (April, 1968), pp. 62-80; Kenneth Lockridge, *A New England Town, the First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736* (New York, 1970); J. M. Bumsted, "Religion, Finance, and Democracy in Massachusetts: The Town of Norton as a Case Study," *Journal of American History*, 57 (1970-71), pp. 817-31; Edward M. Cook, Jr., "Social Behavior and Changing Values in Dedham, Massachusetts, 1700 to 1775," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd. ser., 27 (1970), pp. 546-80; Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, 1970); David Grayson Allen, "The Zuckerman Thesis and the Process of Legal Rationalization in Provincial Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd. ser., 29 (1972), pp. 443-60. See also Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

4 Lockridge, "Land, Population, and Society," pp. 73, 74.

5 Bumsted, "Religion, Finance, and Democracy," p. 828.

6 Allen, "Zuckerman Thesis," p. 454.

ties. But she did manage to organize expeditions well before either of the major wars broke out, and in comparison with the military contributions of other colonies, she was a leader.

There is no simple explanation for Massachusetts' imperial escapades: a safety valve theory is only a partial answer and certainly the desire for patronage in supply contracts, and preferment and status for the officer class (all carefully choreographed by the patronage-conscious, master-imperialist William Shirley) played a role. But whatever the mix of explanations, one is forced to conclude that internal considerations seemed every bit as compelling as the threat of French invasion. Take the Kennebec expedition, for example. Here was a trek of 500 young men through a sparsely settled area of Maine that turned up not a trace of the supposed French invaders. Was the French threat the reason for this escapade, or was it initiated by Shirley and the Kennebec Proprietors as essentially a real estate promotion: show the young, land-hungry, would-be farmers the land and then let nature take its course?

Fortunately we know something about the men who made up the major expeditions into Nova Scotia. There are fairly complete lists of the participants in both the Louisbourg expedition of 1745 and the Beausejour expedition of 1755.⁷ The latter list is the more valuable since it includes not only names but also age, place of birth, place of last residence, and occupation. Confirming the safety valve theory, analysis shows that the volunteers were young, more than 75 per cent of them were laborers or artisans rather than farmers, and the vast majority of them came from established farming communities, particularly in Essex, Middlesex, and Bristol counties. The percentage of volunteers from the large coastal towns such as Boston, from the fishing counties such as Barnstable, and from frontier areas — western Hampshire and the Maine counties — was low suggesting that recruitment was very much a function of the agricultural recession.⁸ Interestingly, recruit-

7 "Louisbourg Soldiers," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 24 (Boston, 1870), pp. 367-80; 25 (1871), pp. 249-69; [John Winslow's] "Journal and Correspondence During the Expeditions to Nova Scotia and Crown Point," 10 February 1755 to 23 April 1757, pp. 20-64, an unpublished manuscript in the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

8 My analysis differs somewhat from Rawlyk's which appears on pp. 208-9 of his book. He concludes that "the regional response does not fall quickly into any discernible pattern" (p. 209). But, through mathematical error, he greatly underestimates the percentage of volunteers from Middlesex County, the population of which was less than that of Essex County. If he is correct that there were 411 volunteers from Middlesex, the ratio of volunteers to total male population over sixteen years of age is 5 per cent. My own estimate, however, places the percentage of volunteers in Middlesex at between 3 and 4 per cent, still high compared with Suffolk (including Boston), York, and Barnstable. Rawlyk also incorrectly locates the list of volunteers in the Massachusetts Archives rather than the Massachusetts Historical Society.

ment seems also to have been a function of the political role of the towns although here it is difficult to tell which is cause and which effect. There were nearly 28 per cent more recruits from towns that formed the political opposition in the Massachusetts General Court from 1755 to 1765 as compared with the towns that formed the governor's friends or Court Party.⁹ Since political opposition sprang in part from agricultural recession, at first it would seem we are dealing only in common causes. But also to be considered is the educative impact of the Nova Scotian experience on the young and impressionable minds of the amateur soldiers from Massachusetts. The experience of the First World War entirely transformed the values of a generation of Europeans. What did Louisbourg and Beausejour do to the thinking of New Englanders?

There was bitterness and anger, for one thing, when the British took the credit for the victories and gave scant credit to the real victors, the New Englanders. There were clashes, too, between colonial forces and British officers that left permanent scars. On the other hand, there was the overwhelming pride of accomplishment: New Englanders had not only played a part in events of world importance, but they had beaten the French, renowned for their military prowess. And this was the generation that was to put Massachusetts in the forefront of Revolution by the 1760s. It makes more than a little sense, therefore, to see Massachusetts' Nova Scotian experience as an essential link in the development of a revolutionary mentality. We know that the main thrust of revolutionary sentiment and activity sprang from Boston strongly backed by many of the agricultural towns caught in the land crisis.¹⁰ From a generally introverted, parochial, self-consciousness in the early eighteenth century, the people of these towns developed a larger vision of themselves and their country. They came to see themselves as fitting actors on the world stage and as capable of taking on a world power in combat. Is that what the Nova Scotian experience had done for them?

That certainly was the impression given by James Otis, the popular leader and propagandist, who in 1765 reminded his countrymen that in the late war "men from time to time were cheerfully raised, and monies granted by the provincial representatives of the people, who in reflecting on the honour and happiness of being enabled to serve their King & country in this way, had also the pleasure of contemplating their own importance in society."¹¹ Otis's

9 The correlation of towns from which volunteers came with the legislative voting record of those same towns is based upon Stephen E. Patterson, *Political Parties in Revolutionary Massachusetts* (Madison, Wis., 1973), Appendix A, pp. 258-65.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 45-48, 55-62.

11 James Otis, *Brief Remarks on the Defence of the Halifax Libel on the British-American Colonies* (Boston, 1765), p. 9. Otis also wrote *A Vindication of the British Colonies, Against the Aspersions of the Halifax Gentlemen, in His Letter to a Rhode-Island Friend* (Boston, 1765), both of which were answers to a skillful pamphlet by a Tory member of the Newport Junto, Martin Howard, Jr., *A Letter from a Gentleman at Halifax to His Friend in Rhode-*

remarks remind us that whatever the colonists' view of the British empire was to become, they were still convinced in the 1760s of the general benignity of the old imperial system. In fact, in their debate with Great Britain, the colonists showed that they accepted the mercantilist theory of empire, knowing full well that in practice, it provided protection and profits for colonial entrepreneurs so long as they were quick to seize the opportunities that presented themselves. This is the sense in which Massachusetts was "imperialistic" in the provincial period. If expansion was a goal, it was British imperial expansion, and at no time did Massachusetts leaders argue for removal of the French from Acadia in any other terms. It is simply an anachronism to debate the issue as to whether Massachusetts was imperialistic or "isolationist" on its own behalf, as if Massachusetts were itself an independent country with territorial ambitions. Discussions of Massachusetts' military adventures in Nova Scotia on these terms carry us little towards an understanding of the Massachusetts-Nova Scotia dynamic.

One suspects, however, that a good, detailed discussion of the economic ties between the two colonies would bear fruit. Unfortunately no historian has so far told the story of Massachusetts' trade with the French, their virtual supply of Fortress Louisbourg, or of Thomas Hancock's and Charles Apthorps' supply of the British military at Annapolis and Halifax and of their possible relation with the development of Massachusetts policy towards Nova Scotia during the Seven Years' War. Nor has anyone adequately explained the commercial network that developed between Boston and Halifax under the aegis of New England (chiefly Boston) merchants in Halifax such as Benjamin and Joseph Gerrish, Malachy Salter, Joseph Gray, and John Fillis. These were the men who were responsible for the pressure that led to the creation of Nova Scotia's assembly, and it was also they who successfully asserted the assembly's control over the Lieutenant Governor, Jonathan Belcher, in the early 1760s.¹² To what extent were their political actions reflections of their busi-

Island (Newport, R.I., 1765). In *Brief Remarks*, Otis does everything but identify Howard by name, making it clear that it is a Rhode Islander and not a Haligonian with whom he is contending. While Otis continues to refer to his adversary as the "Halifax gentleman", and even the "Halifax Tartar", it is clear that his invective is directed at Howard, not, as Rawlyk would have us believe (p. 229), at Halifax. It is impossible to see in either of Otis's pamphlets the least reflection on Nova Scotia or on Halifax without a gross distortion of Otis's intent. Rawlyk, who quotes from Otis's *Brief Remarks*, incorrectly refers us to Otis's *A Vindication*, (p. 279, fn. 44).

- 12 Especially informative of Boston trade with Nova Scotia is W. T. Baxter, *The House of Hancock: Business in Boston, 1724-1775* (New York, 1965 ed.), pp. 96-110. The role of the New England merchants in early Nova Scotian politics is covered by W. S. MacNutt, "The Beginnings of Nova Scotia Politics, 1758-1766," *Canadian Historical Review*, 16 (1935), pp. 41-53; Brebner, *The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia*, pp. 18-22, 66-89; and the old but useful Duncan Campbell, *Nova Scotia in its Historical, Mercantile and Industrial Relations* (Montreal, 1873), pp. 133-40.

ness connections with Massachusetts or, more subtly, of their sense of how the various parts of the empire should function? Certainly, the massive influx of New England settlers that followed the expulsion of the Acadians directly benefited them and their Massachusetts partners. It was the enterprise of these Halifax and Boston merchants — partners and often blood relations — that reveal what the concept of empire meant in the eighteenth century from the colonial point of view, and how the British imperial system worked.

George Rawlyk approaches some of these problems, but he seldom tackles them. At best his book is a recitation of those events, chiefly military, which dotted the history of the relations between Massachusetts and Nova Scotia for a century and a half. The detail occasionally becomes rich and interesting, as it does in his discussion of Louisbourg as a symbol of New England's purpose, and again of Paul Mascarene, the even-handed administrator at Annapolis Royal, although in both cases Rawlyk was heavily reliant on the work of former students. But where the book is about Nova Scotia, Rawlyk pretty much leaves Brebner in command of the field, and where it is about Massachusetts, Rawlyk ignores recent literature and fails to seize the opportunities for interpretation that present themselves. There is more to the Massachusetts-Nova Scotia dynamic than he tells us.

STEPHEN E. PATTERSON

Canadian Painting: Regional or National History?

The traditional test of the petty regional mind is how it responds to a national publication. The scenario is simple as it is common. The publication is received in the mail (late), and an immediate check made of the authors to see which old class-mate has taken unfair advantage of his proximity to the publisher to flog yet another modest article. That done, then it is on to the team check: a cumulative assessment of how our side made out and, finally, the formulation of a series of complaints on how misunderstood we are by the agents of centralism. I have just gone through a form of this exercise with some recent national publications in the field of art history. Persons of sense have long argued that a full knowledge of a country can only be obtained when the investigator is thoroughly knowledgeable in all the regional characteristics that together make up the whole. In the case of Canada surely no one believes any longer that the soul of the country was forged on and limited by the Laurentian Shield. That said, the question is how did the Atlantic provinces fare in the publications under review — fare in the sense of how well understood and how accurately assessed in terms of accomplishment and national importance? The answer is that the Atlantic provinces fare as well as the whole publication, and the reason is the presence or absence of sound scholarship.