

Timber Colony

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listes. Ces derniers ont autant besoin des historiens que les historiens d'eux.

PIERRE TRÉPANIER

Timber Colony

The great theme of the geographical approach to the past is the interaction between man and the land. The boundaries of the discipline of historical geography are not, however, rigid ones and Graeme Wynn's *Timber Colony: a Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth Century New Brunswick* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1981) is very nearly as much a study of an historical era as it is an account of a geographical landscape. By drawing resourcefully on the tools of the geographer Wynn seeks to revitalize the tradition of historical writing that focuses on the effects of dependence on a single export staple. He sets out to establish that New Brunswick in the first half of the 19th century shared a common experience both with its staple-exporting neighbours and with distant lands that were participating in the network of British oceanic commerce. New Brunswick, he maintains, was "affected in countless intangible, but nonetheless far-reaching, ways by the transatlantic diffusion of attitudes and beliefs tempered in the experience of the world's first industrial nation" (p. 10).

The closing of the Baltic to British Trade not long after the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 opened up for British North America an apparently limitless market for forest products. Between then and mid-century, New Brunswick grew at a faster rate than its neighbouring provinces and states, except for Upper Canada, from around 25,000 inhabitants in 1803 to 193,000 in 1851. In the middle of a war, a province already short of manpower nevertheless found axemen to cut and square logs into "ton timber" and crews to stow the timber aboard ships to be taken to sawmills in Britain. Many workers were recruited from the neighbouring states. By 1812 exports of ton timber had multiplied about twentyfold, to approach 100,000 tons. In 1825 they reached 417,000 tons, an all-time high. Late that year, a severe recession began from which the trade recovered only gradually. Its effects were compounded by a great natural disaster, the destruction of accumulated capital in the form of houses and facilities and of great areas of forest land in fires that extended from the mouth of the Miramichi to the Oromocto Valley. Ton timber continued to be exported in quantity, at a level of 200,000 tons or more annually, into the 1840s. By then, however, muscle power was being supplemented extensively by machine power in the wood industry. "Timber" was made through the labour of men and animals, but the making of "lumber" required the application of mechanical power. The recovery of the export trade in the 1830s was based

mainly on a trade in lumber, largely in the form of deals produced by sawmills.

A superficial reading of the first of the series of essays comprising *Timber Colony*, "Introduction: a Context for Inquiry", may lead some sensitive devotees of regional culture to get the impression that here is another dismissal of Maritimers for perversely employing conservative tools and refusing to adapt to the methods of the age. This would be a mistaken reading. The author is fascinated by the way in which technology determines, or at least goes a considerable way to help determine, patterns of community life. He maintains that producers of timber, like almost all other producers of commodities in the world outside a small area of western Europe, were not very innovative. Dependent on an industry with an essentially static technological complex, New Brunswick was still in the age of wood, wind and water, though it was closely linked to and influenced by Britain, which had moved into the age of steam power. Industrialization advanced at an uneven pace, and while it may be helpful in looking at British history to separate the 18th and 19th centuries, overseas the great divide came around 1850. Thus, Wynn writes, "New Brunswick landscapes resembled those of the eighteenth century seaboard more closely than they did those of Australia and the American West, which were shaped in the late nineteenth century by the paleotechnic perfection of railroads and mechanized farm machinery" (p. 9).

Throughout the first half of the century the New Brunswick economy behaved like a yo-yo, "a giant bandalore, ineluctably tied by the lines of transatlantic commerce to the rise and fall of the market for its staple product" (p. 53). Wynn has composed a fine essay on this theme, and though it adds little to what has been written by W.S. MacNutt, Arthur Lower and others, students will find it a concise guide to economic upturns and downturns and a convenient account of the changes in the degree of protection enjoyed by North American timber in the British market. The instability in that market and the uncertainties within New Brunswick that arose from fear that the British would embrace free trade are well documented. During good years the province advanced. During the periods of depression in 1819, 1826 to 1830 and 1840 to 1842, the lack of cash led to insolvencies and the filling of the debtors' prisons. The collapse of prices in 1847 and 1848, following a high point in timber shipments in 1846, brought this era to an end on a very pessimistic note.

The most original parts of *Timber Colony* are the three chapters that examine the getting of the timber, the rise of sawmilling, and the role of entrepreneurship. Wynn communicates a lively sense of what life must have been like in the woods, and he has used relevant literature from Maine very effectively to supplement his New Brunswick sources. The early lumber camps, the size and setting of timber berths, the chopping and hauling, the log brows, the river drive, the wangan, booms, rafting, and the invention of the peavey are all here; everything, in short, except long blankets, beanhole beans, and tall stories.

Returning from a journey to the mouth of the Miramichi River in the autumn of 1809, the administrator of the province, General Martin Hunter, reported that "salted salmon and potatoes is the only food of the inhabitants; no bread anywhere, their last year's corn had long been done, and this year's they had not yet begun".¹ The challenges faced by the people who first responded to the demand for timber are largely unrecorded. Wynn sees the early days as a time when there were opportunities for men of small means to improve their circumstances and achieve independence. Merchant-wholesalers were the coordinators of the commerce, following the tradition of the all-purpose merchants who dominated 18th century business. Representative of this group were the Ward family in Saint John who continued to be active in the West Indian trade but also became exporters of timber and entered into sawmilling and shipbuilding. They worked through agents in Britain to sell their timber and lumber and to import supplies and manufactures. In the Saint John Valley, farmer-lumbermen, country storekeepers, jobbers and small sawmillers, organized the cutting of the wood and sent it down the river. In return, they received and distributed the supplies brought upriver from the seaport. The merchant-wholesalers supplied the lines of credit that held the structure together.

Cash played a significant role in the exchange of goods and services and Wynn notes that the truck system, in which the lesser men received credit in the form of supplies and often got themselves deeply into debt, "was never as important or as opprobrious an instrument in the timber trade as it was in the fishery" (p. 200 Fn. 54). The author suggests two main reasons for this. First, farmers participating in the timber trade part-time were less dependent on the staple than the fishermen, and second, the regulations that governed access to the forest were increasingly effective after 1825 in offering large timber operators resource control. Through the years, all aspects of timber-getting, except for the size of the logs, underwent an increase in scale. The small family-lumberman was gradually displaced by larger firms. By mid-century, Wynn argues, though the small family venture continued to be part of the system, overall individual autonomy was being reduced. In a parallel development, a "ubiquitous scatter" of simple, small, water-powered mills serving local demand was gradually replaced by larger mills that increased in number, size, speed, cost, accuracy, and capacity as the years went by. The diagrams and text on the technology of sawmilling are very good indeed. The 1840s was a decade of "portentous" change, with old mills being abandoned and new large mills built near the coast, notably at the mouth of the Saint John River. Steam engines, which had been installed only rarely before that time, came into extensive use. This required a substantial investment and by mid-century, Wynn concludes, an industrial proletariat, or something close to it, existed in several places. By that time also,

¹"The Journal of General Sir Martin Hunter", typescript of book privately printed in Edinburgh, 1894, Saint John Free Public Library, pp. 104-5.

“the increasing capitalization necessary to exploit inaccessible timber had called into existence a fulltime lumbering proletariat” (p. 86).

The “quintessential hierarchically structured mercantile landscape of the timber trade”, Wynn maintains, “was most fully developed in the St. John Valley” (p. 118). Certainly the richest store of information on the roles of smaller men, in the form of diaries, account books and correspondence, comes from along that river. But Wynn unfortunately has very little to say about the structure of trade on the St. Croix, where the operation of the trade might have been a good test of some aspects of his structural model. A large part of the land in the southern part of the province had passed into the private domain, so that the applications for cutting rights and other reports on Crown lands are not a reliable guide to activity there. In the 1830s, liberally aided by an inflow of American capital, a great many sawmills were built and lumber replaced timber as the chief export. Of all the parishes in the province St. Stephen on the St. Croix River employed by far the largest number of millhands. The selective cutting on both private and public lands that had been practised in the early years had left behind trees which had grown to a size that, while too small to make timber, could profitably be cut into deals. Meantime, timber-making continued to be the main activity in the northeast into the 1840s. The dividing line between the two regions is the height of land separating waterways leading into the Bay of Fundy from those flowing into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and very few lumbermen moved from one watershed to the other. Each section had its own links to the overseas world. Though the firm of Pollok, Gilmour and Company of Glasgow had three branch houses in the northeast and one in Saint John, they operated independently. The great rival to this firm in the northeast was Joseph Cunard. Through a detailed analysis of their timber licences, Wynn has provided new background to the well-known story of their political rivalry, though their relationship to the small men on the Miramichi is still unclear.

Just how much did the greater centralization in the northeast owe to local geography, how much to business culture, how much to government encouragement, how much to the absence, so often assumed, of entrepreneurial energy among the Irish and Acadians who made up a large part of the population, and how much to the inability of the small men in the Miramichi Valley to withstand the buffeting of natural disaster and business recession? Wynn attributes it to the relative absence of settlers along the rivers, the difficulties of terrain and drainage, the remoteness of much of the timber and the advantages that government regulations conferred upon large-scale investors from the mid-1820s onwards. Most of the land was Crown property and theories of colonial development that were popular in official circles, and which were accepted by Thomas Baillie, New Brunswick's commissioner of Crown lands, placed emphasis on capitalist investment. It is, however, the similarities in the organization of the trade in the north and south of the province that he tends to emphasize. Once the market

turned down, as it did, broadly, in the second quarter of the century, commercial commitment to the trade in New Brunswick exceeded the market's capacity to absorb wood. A boom and bust economy tended to favour businesses with the resources to ride out economic downturns. It was not local environmental factors but an historical process, arising from commercial ties, that was the predominant force in the shaping of New Brunswick communities: "prevailing economic attitudes", Wynn states, "emerging social relationships and dominant canons of success in mid-century Chatham were essentially those of Belper and Etruria a hundred years before. . . .the developments engendered by these dominant values and laissez-faire assumptions spelled the gradual constriction of individual opportunity, and the decline of yeomanly independence with the emergence of a powerful entrepreneurial class and a growing proletariat" (p. 137).

By suggesting the comparison between Chatham and the fledgling industrial world of 18th century Belper and Etruria, Wynn casts some doubt on his own representation of New Brunswick society in the 1830s and 1840s as one in the process of becoming an attenuated provincial version of industrial Britain. Outside of Saint John, the proletariat in Chatham was probably the largest in the province. If human relationships in Chatham were more reminiscent of the 18th than of the 19th century, what was the situation elsewhere? In looking for 18th century comparisons, it is likely that we shall find fruitful parallels not only in Belper and Etruria, but also in the pre-industrial society of E.P. Thompson's *Whigs and Hunters* (London, 1975), with its trenchant analysis of the pattern of life within and on the edge of a Crown forest to the west of London. There we would find the counterparts of the Newlights of Maugerville, to whom the right to take timber from the King's Woods for their own purposes was an article of faith.²

Historians reading this book will be impressed by the effective use of illustrations to communicate information. Throughout *Timber Colony* the text is complemented by maps, charts, diagrams, graphs and photographs. The map showing forest zones in Chapter I, "New Brunswick at the Beginning of the Century", is worth pages of explanation on the sizes and the characteristics of geographic regions within the province. Wynn also has a gift for selecting apt images and quotations and in a few lines successfully conveys the incongruity of the genteel pretensions of Loyalist ladies in a frontier environment. Because this chapter is very short and highly selective, readers will have to look elsewhere for information on the underlying geology and for all but a basic outline of the topography. The discussion of government regulation of the woods, in Chapter 6, is also very brief, and readers desiring more than an outline survey of the role played by local government will want to consult one of the author's earlier articles or his

2 W.S. MacNutt, *New Brunswick. A History: 1784-1867* (Toronto, 1963), pp. 142-3.

excellent doctoral thesis on the Crown lands.³

The shortcomings of the very brief discussion of agriculture are more serious. In view of the significance of patterns of land usage in his overall scheme, the author could have made use of tables drawn from the assessment records of Sunbury County by William Moore.⁴ They reveal significant differences between the river-front and back-country farms in an important lumbering area. There is also information that indicates a continuing concern almost everywhere over the shortage of hay land in a region where livestock had to be stabled for so large a part of the year. Over how many months could animals forage for themselves in the early 19th century? While his observations on agriculture are sketchy for a book on this topic, Wynn's judgements are shrewd and perceptive. He is surely right in stressing that farm-clearing was an on-going process and that significant numbers of successful farmers were actively involved in the timber trade. He does not, however, seriously examine those near-proletarians, the unsuccessful settlers for whom "the silver dollar near the eye" concealed the view of their distant farms, but who used those farms as shelters in times of adversity.

Inevitably, in a book covering so much ground there are a few questionable statements. For example, the estimate of 25 to 30 cords for the amount of wood burned per household each year (p. 19) is far too high. Alexander McLaggan moved to the Miramichi in the 1830s, as the footnote indicates, not in the 1820s (p. 63). The figure of 74,000 used for the 1824 census (p. 78), is taken from the records of the legislature; in a report made in the following year by Archdeacon Best, there is a note stating that 5000 should be added to the total for returns that came in too late for inclusion in the published census, bringing the figure to 79,176.⁵ Prince Edward Island was not the only North American colony that was smaller than New Brunswick in 1850 (p. 3); Newfoundland and Vancouver Island were both smaller. Unless the workforce included a very large number of single men from the United States, the estimate that probably fewer than a third of the adult males were engaged in lumbering and directly related activities at the height of the timber trade in 1824-25 (p. 84) seems to be unduly low, since it would mean that each man made and loaded, on average, around 100 tons of timber as well as an unspecified quantity of lumber. Also, Wynn greatly undervalues the skills of the New Brunswick axeman. It is true that the use of the axe is easily learnt (p. 82). So is the use of the cricket bat and the hockey stick, but it requires a high degree of skill to make a living with such simple tools.

3 "Administration in Adversity: The Deputy Surveyors and Control of the New Brunswick Crown Forest Before 1844", *Acadiensis*, VII (Autumn 1977), pp. 49-65, and "The Assault on the New Brunswick Forest, 1780-1850", Ph. D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1974.

4 William Moore, "Sunbury County, 1768-1839", M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1977.

5 Enclosure in Rev. George Best to Rev. Anthony Hamilton, 27 April 1825, Colonial Office Papers, 188/32, Public Record Office.

Finally, it must be said that *Timber Colony* is a book which is a pleasure to read. Well-designed and accurately proofed, *Timber Colony* also has the benefit of the author's ability to present a wide-ranging amount of evidence in the pages of a relatively short and often elegant collection of historical essays. There is of course a need for more intensive studies of business communities, of agriculture, of the fishery, and of the exploitation of private land, where a good start is being made in studies of individual parishes undertaken by a new generation of graduate students. But the scope and sophistication of work in 19th century New Brunswick history will be immensely aided by the publication of *Timber Colony*. We have waited a very long time for a scholar to come forward to continue the work of W.F. Ganong on the historical geography of the province. Now that Graeme Wynn has put another major stepping stone in place, researchers will be able to see more clearly how to proceed in the direction of a definitive work on the development of the New Brunswick landscape.

MURRAY YOUNG

Cape Breton: History and Tradition

Ten or 15 years ago there were few adequate secondary works on the social and political history of Cape Breton in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Eugene Forsey's study of the coal industry, and Harold Logan's work on the Provincial Workmen's Association were notable exceptions, but by the 1960s both were somewhat dated. There were also a series of royal commission reports, but these were often quite narrowly mission-oriented.¹ Now this is beginning to change. Since 1970 a number of studies on modern Cape Breton have appeared, most of them in article form but a few of book length as well. Indeed, the whole field of Cape Breton studies is expanding, with new work also being done on older and more traditional topics, such as the Loyalists and the French régime. Brian Tennyson's highly useful *Cape Breton: A Bibliography* (Halifax, Department of Education, 1978), which lists work completed to 1976, confirms this development. And Cape Bretoners themselves are becoming more aware of their folk past and culture, and this is reflected in *Cape Breton's Magazine*, which has been publishing since 1972.

¹ Eugene Forsey, *Economic and Social Aspects of the Nova Scotia Coal Industry* (Toronto, 1926); H.A. Logan, *Trade Unions in Canada: Their Development and Functioning* (Toronto, 1948), pp. 158-208, 249-267. Royal Commission reports include: Nova Scotia, *Report of the royal commission on the coal mining industry in Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1926); Canada, *Report of the royal commission on Maritime claims* (Ottawa, 1926); Nova Scotia, *Report of the royal commission respecting the coal mines of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1932).