

Chronicles of Place: Synthesis and Historiography in Recent Books About Atlantic Canada

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Chronicles of Place: Synthesis and Historiography in Recent Books About Atlantic Canada

THE WAVE OF ATLANTIC CANADIAN general surveys and provincial histories published in the last decade offers an opportunity to explore the connections, overlapping themes, and fissures between academic and popular history. Notably, among this cohort of books are some attempts to bridge what are often regarded as two very distinct genres. In a recent review in the *New York Review of Books*, Gordon S. Wood proposed that the difference between academic and popular history was not a specialized vocabulary and writing style but rather the historiographical assumptions and preconceptions of the author and audience. He argues that academic histories typically focus on “specialized problems” and build on previous, related books while assuming that the reader is familiar with the earlier arguments and questions. He concludes that most academic historians have abandoned the prospect of synthesis of overarching, long-term historical accounts and have generally left “narrative history-writing to the nonacademic historians and independent scholars who unfortunately often write without much concern for, or much knowledge of, the extensive monographic literature that exists.”¹ This review essay examines eleven narrative surveys of either the region or a particular province with a view to evaluating both the extent to which popular overviews reflect current historiography and the efforts of academic historians who have not abandoned the goal of synthesis.

This group of eleven narrative surveys is all the more interesting as five of them were written by academic historians and intended for a general audience. At a time when academic history has generally shifted from questions of identity and culture to issues surrounding individual agency, transnational and global connections, environmental history, and understanding power through the new political history, it is interesting to explore the extent to which these trends are found in these general works of Atlantic Canadian history. For instance, the current Canadian academic historical preoccupation of wrestling with the existence of or challenges to the liberal order is much less apparent in these works, while transnational and global connections are very visible.

The authors of virtually all of the eleven books identify their readership as those falling at the popular end of the spectrum aimed at the tourist and local general readers through to university undergraduates. While all of the books considered are heavily influenced by historiographic trends of the last 40 years and present a more inclusive version of the past, this collection of books contains considerable diversity. With varying degrees of success, they include the racial and ethnic diversity of the region along with the contributions of both men and women. Margaret Conrad’s and James K. Hiller’s *Atlantic Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Sean Cadigan’s *Newfoundland & Labrador: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), for instance, which are both published

1 Gordon S. Wood, “The Real Washington at Last,” 9 Dec 2010, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/dec/09/real-washington-last/>.

by academic presses, sit at one end and are suitable for university undergraduates and the non-specialist general reader. On the other hand, Ed Whitcomb's three books – *A Short History of Nova Scotia* (Ottawa, ON: From Sea to Sea Enterprises, 2009); *A Short History of New Brunswick* (Ottawa, ON: From Sea to Sea Enterprises, 2010); and *A Short History of Prince Edward Island* (Ottawa, ON: From Sea to Sea Enterprises, 2010) – are furthest away from current academic trends in historiography. This series of self-published books, almost expanded pamphlets, are between 56 and 72 pages in length and form part of an ambitious personal national provincial history project begun in 1975. The volume on Newfoundland and Labrador is forthcoming and will be one of the final two volumes to finish the series. All of these volumes focus on institutional politics and the state, and the time period examined variously concludes between the 1960s and the early 1980s. Unlike all of the other books aimed at a popular audience, there are no illustrations in these books.

John Boileau's *The Peaceful Revolution: 250 years of Democracy in Nova Scotia* (Halifax, NS: Nimbus, 2008) is also firmly in the popular camp and, as the book's title suggests, adheres to a state-centred, institutional approach to politics. This beautifully illustrated book focuses on the themes of representative government, responsible government, and the freedom of the press and speech. Firmly embedded in the Whiggish narrative of progress, and taking a trans-Atlantic perspective, Boileau takes the reader back to the Magna Carta. Central to Boileau's version of the Nova Scotia story is Joseph Howe, described as "unquestionably one of the greatest Nova Scotians who ever lived" (125). The tone of such an unequivocal claim is consistent with the book's unquestioning celebration of democratic progress.

Lesley Choyce's *Nova Scotia: Shaped by the Sea: A Living History* (East Lawrencetown, NS: Pottersfield Press, 2007) has a completely different feel about it. Beautifully written and frequently moving, Choyce does not write as a neutral observer, but rather strongly inserts his own life and experience with Nova Scotia into this sweeping historical account. It is a work of historical synthesis that includes the author's current reflections and experience with place. Written by someone who is generally a writer of fiction, this account is marked by engaging prose; but this is no simplistic chronological historical narrative. The audience for this book is not tourists passing through; rather, they are Nova Scotians or those seeking almost an intimate understanding of the place and its people by building on some previous knowledge.

In Choyce's version of Nova Scotia's past, institutions are present and explored. But the main character of this story is the Atlantic Ocean and the way it has actively shaped Nova Scotia's resources, climate, and culture. This new, revised edition combines his almost romantic love of place with an acute awareness of historical injustices and environmental degradation while bringing the story right up to the present. An attention to nature is mirrored by an awareness of technology – various vessels, inventions, undersea cables, and "the environmental price tag of progress" (287). The province's ethnic diversity is a constant theme, and Choyce explores race and class along with rural and urban experiences. Traces of underdevelopment theory, or perhaps simply an expression of provincial nationalism, more common among professional historians in the 1980s than now, will find resonance among some general readers. This is a hefty book (over 300 pages), offering 46 short chapters. The number of images is sparse compared to other popular histories, but

they are very well chosen and often not the familiar, iconic images readers of history are used to seeing reproduced. This is not a neutral chronicle of events, but a passion-filled account urging readers to do better in the future. He believes that we can learn from the mistakes of history, be they racism, environmental degradation, or dangerous workplaces.

In terms of the look and feel of the book, Douglas Baldwin's *Prince Edward Island: An Illustrated History* (Halifax, NS: Nimbus, 2009) provides an almost complete opposite experience for the reader. As suggested by the title, illustrations are key. Virtually every page has a sidebar, photograph, drawing, graph, chart, or map. This is an accessible book with a great deal of information concerning politics, the economy, society, demographics, and culture presented in a clear and straightforward manner. The book begins with glaciers and dinosaurs and ends at the present, with the majority of the book focused on the period between the 19th-century Land Question and the First World War. Throughout this account Baldwin is especially attentive to the inclusion of Acadians and Aboriginal people in the Island's history, and his own scholarly interests are evident in the attention given to health issues. Public health is rarely considered in general histories, and there is also an interesting, but quirky, appendix of images of the Island in Canadian postal stamps. The audience for this book is explicitly identified as "the general reader, the interested tourist, and the amateur historian" (iv). There is nothing controversial about the account (except perhaps the unfortunate extreme condensing of time that places an image of a dinosaur beside a discussion of Paleo-Indians and Mi'kmaq). There are no challenges to preconceived images – Anne of Green Gables, foxes, and potatoes are present – and more contemporary sensitive issues, such as non-resident landownership and corporate agriculture, are delicately handled, with the author presenting a cautious and balanced account.

The thematic and chronological organization of John Reid's *Nova Scotia: A Pocket History* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood, 2009) is more challenging than Baldwin's book in that it rejects a linear organization of events and indirectly asks readers to confront how a state-centred approach to place distorts history. Although it is aimed at a popular audience, contemporary academic historiographical assumptions shape this ambitious book as it reflects postmodern notions of identity and power and avoids conflating place and a homogenous history; it is a synthesis that acknowledges distinct experiences. Reid recounts the history of the place now known as Nova Scotia by concurrently layering the histories of Mi'kma'ki, Acadie, and Nova Scotia. He begins with the premise that it can be a "risky undertaking" (10) to construct a narrative defined by today's boundaries and, by following each of them from beginning to the present, Reid avoids the common practice of reinforcing the impression that the Aboriginal or Acadian experience have disappeared or been subsumed by current political organization or that current definitions are somehow either inevitable or natural. By focusing on both recognized and de facto nations, Reid is able to delicately sidestep issues of fixing stable racial or ethnic identities on specific peoples.

Nova Scotia: A Pocket History reflects Reid's own scholarly interests, with a strong emphasis on the early period. "Nova Scotia" is divided into three chapters: the first beginning in 1621, with the Charter of New Scotland; the second in 1820, when the boundaries of current Nova Scotia were established with the re-integration

of Cape Breton; and the third commencing with the serious economic dislocation that followed the First World War. General readers may be surprised that his periodization does not revolve around Confederation but rather the continuity of the 19th century. The continued co-existence of Mi'kma'ki, Acadie, and Nova Scotia emphasized in this book helps underline the complexity of what is now known as Nova Scotia and its relationships with "wider worlds" (154), which have included Indigenous, Atlantic, British, and Canadian spheres. In rejecting a narrative structure that naturalizes the status quo, Aboriginal people do not disappear from the story and Acadia does not end in 1755. For Reid, nothing is inevitable but rather contingent, complex, and concurrent. To achieve this degree of nuance in a 160-page book, complete with a moderate number of illustrations, is an impressive feat.

Edward MacDonald's *If You're Stronghearted: Prince Edward Island in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottetown, PE: Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, 2000) is a successful hybrid serving simultaneously as both a reference book and an extremely readable and engaging account of Prince Edward Island in the 20th century. I suspect the book was intended for a local audience, for although it is heavily and beautifully illustrated with images on nearly every page there is no labeled map. The sole map in the book shows the density of potato farming in 1995; while this is interesting, a reader not familiar with the Island's geography would at times literally be lost.

Based on a wide range of primary sources and secondary reading, the author also generously passes along anecdotes and stories he had collected and thus bestows an informal storytelling flavour on the writing – frequently providing great wit and offering ordinary people a voice. The book brings together economic, political, demographic, social, and cultural themes, and progresses chronologically over the course of ten chapters. Although the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Northumberland Strait are present, this is a land-focused account remarkably different from Choyce's more outward and sea-orientated portrayal of Nova Scotia's 20th century. The material reflects the existing scholarship, which has frequently focused on outmigration and regional disparity. Its most original contribution is in the realm of Prince Edward Island and modernity, as the Island's insular status meant that it may well have been more feasible to debate the impact of technology there than most other places in Canada or North America generally. Whether this was the Island ban on automobiles or an ambivalent reaction on some farms to rural electrification (249), MacDonald sensitively explains what was at stake. There are also many examples of progressive experiments, such as consolidated schools and the entrepreneurial craze that accompanied fox breeding.

MacDonald's interest in politics is sustained throughout the book and covers provincial governments and political leaders (and their policies) as well as the ongoing dynamic of federal-provincial relations. His discussion of post-Second World War development initiatives and the particular challenges of a tourist economy are among the book's strengths. Other strong points include the final chapter's focus on rural issues and the environment (exploring issues of development and environmental degradation both on land through erosion and pesticides and in the sea through the collapse of the fisheries) as well as the discussion of issues of globalization and the challenge of perpetuating a distinct identity in a global economy. MacDonald believes "islands *are* different" (386) and,

in a world where virtual technology is “unmaking geography,” he concludes with the call that Islanders “will have to find a place somewhere along the continuum between the universal and the local, progress and nostalgia” (387).

Another island is the subject of Patrick O’Flaherty’s *Lost Country: The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland, 1843-1933* (St. John’s, NL: Long Beach Press, 2005). This is also an excellent reference book, but probably not suitable for most casual readers. I would argue, however, that it still falls within the scope of synthesis as the chronological and thematic breadth aims to create a coherent whole. O’Flaherty, a retired English professor and therefore somewhat removed from some historiographical issues, presents a dense but very well-written nationalist account of the British colony during this period of relative independence until the Commission of Government began in 1934. The book is a sequel to his *Old Newfoundland: A History to 1843* (St John’s, NL: Long Beach Press, 1999) and places this latter period in a transnational context, arguing that the fortunes of the colony were largely shaped by external factors and weakened by its colonial status. The strength of this account is its emphasis on traditional political economy and international relations. He argues that the mid-19th century was a period of optimism and hope, and that Newfoundland as a self-governing colony after 1855 was not limited by internal economic factors.

Sean T. Cadigan’s *Newfoundland and Labrador: A History* provides a marked contrast to the interpretative stance presented by O’Flaherty. Here at centre stage is Newfoundland and Labrador’s ecological and environmental context, with topography, climate, ocean currents, fauna, flora, and soil quality (or lack thereof) shaping almost every aspect of human society. The sparse resources of land are contrasted with the former bounty of fisheries and the more recent riches of offshore oil and gas. Cadigan’s extremely readable account runs from prehistory to the present, and has been recognized with the 2010 Dafoe Book Prize for Canadian non-fiction. Along with the emphasis on the environment, Cadigan also insists that Newfoundland and Labrador have always been influenced by a combination of local, national, and imperial forces interacting with a global economy. Transnational institutions and social movements, the political interests of Great Britain, France, Canada, and the United States, and global conflict such as the Second World War shaped Newfoundland and Labrador society. Cadigan also consistently emphasizes Labrador – not as awkward appendage, but as an integrated part of the main story.

In 11 substantial chapters covering the arrival of “Paleo-Indians” on the south coast of Labrador in 7000 BC through to former premier Danny Williams, there is no trace of nostalgia or romance in this synthesis. There is, however, great respect for the environment, as well as two striking maps (among the six that begin the book) that show how ocean currents and limited agricultural soil capabilities shaped settlement and economic patterns. And not only does Cadigan present an inclusive version of the past, with indigenous and Métis people remaining through to the book’s final pages, but his interpretative thrust offers a lucid intellectual critique of Newfoundland nationalism during both the 19th and 20th centuries as he holds 19th-century nationalists to account for squandering resources. In their quest to make Newfoundland a modern industrial (even agricultural!) nation, they ignored the fact that Newfoundland had no control over its rich ocean resources due to the lack of a coherent fisheries policy. He also characterizes nationalism as a strategy employed

by political elites to artificially bridge the internal divisions within Newfoundland and Labrador by distracting citizens “from the failures of provincial policies and to co-opt their support” (296). And he concludes that the problems facing Newfoundland and Labrador today do not result from Confederation, but rather date from the land-centred, nationalist economic development policies of the 19th century (290-2). These policies were put in place by the very same men celebrated by O’Flaherty throughout his book. Cadigan’s Newfoundland and Labrador, above all else, exists in a cold-ocean coastal environment.

The most obvious place to find academic historians still attempting to write a synthesis is in the form of a textbook, such as Margaret R. Conrad and James K. Hiller’s *Atlantic Canada: A History*. The book contains much of the original version – *Atlantic Canada: A Region in the Making* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford, 2001), which appeared as part of Oxford’s Illustrated History of Canada series – and this condensed version is more likely to appear on the syllabus of an undergraduate course on Atlantic Canada than in a general bookstore. In an elegant, literary style most of us probably do not associate with a textbook, *Atlantic Canada* covers the geological, social, economic, political, and cultural history of the region. The overview is still richly illustrated – alas, no colour images – but there are also reproductions of primary sources, biographic sidebars, maps, relevant websites, targeted bibliographies, and starred historiographic articles that individual readers might wish to pursue.

Conrad and Hiller do not take the idea of a unified region as a given; neither do they portray Atlantic Canada as an “artificial geopolitical construct.”² The original subtitle of the Illustrated History volume now appears as the title of the introduction, which explores the idea of “Atlantic Canada” that has developed since Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949 and, as they point out, it is an idea that has rested uneasily among many scholars. Working from a perspective that any definition of any region has to be “fluid, subject to shifts in migrations, trade patterns, political regimes, and communication systems” (v), the book takes the “current political definition of Atlantic Canada” and excludes places such as the Magdalen Islands, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, and Gaspé that at one point would have fallen within the region’s boundaries. In addition, they walk a delicate line – balancing their rejection of a “quintessential Atlantic Canadian regional culture” (vi) while accepting that over time the region’s residents, based on their political and economic marginality, have “increasingly come to share an angle of vision regarding the world they inhabit” (viii).

This short book also has a breathtaking sweep, taking the reader from the beginning of geological time to the present. It proceeds in chronological order through sequential indigenous, transnational, and national political regimes using conventional periodization. In contrast to Reid, 1867 matters a great deal as after that year periodization tends to be organized around economic markers encompassing political, demographic, social, and cultural themes. The balance around the issue of culture is mirrored in the general tone of the textbook, as harsh

2 Margaret R. Conrad and James K. Hiller, *Atlantic Canada: A Concise History* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford, 2006), v.

criticism of the treatment of Aboriginal peoples is balanced with examples of boosterism such as the Cabot Trail and Gros Morne National Park being identified as “two of the most spectacular tourist attractions in the world” (7).

The strongest section of the book is that which deals with the emergence of the Atlantic region during the Second World War and its aftermath. Conrad and Hiller identify coherent and unifying factors in the Atlantic region’s strategic geo-political position between Europe and North America, and the consequential military occupation, the war’s economic impact, and the expanded role of government as commonalities that pre-existed before Newfoundland’s entry into Canada. While never downplaying the continuing diversity of the place and the diversity of experience with the region, Conrad and Hiller clearly argue for convergence within the region – assisted by the impact of neo-liberalism, a globalizing economy, and environmental challenges.

The project of synthesis is challenging for any historian who wishes to emphasize the role of contingency in past actions, to argue that place and community are not always synonymous, and to demonstrate that current political boundaries are not natural but the consequence of specific historic events. Imposing a narrative of artificial coherence can sweep away the range of possibilities that were open in the past and generate a simplistic Whig history celebrating narratives of progress and liberty that is centred on the nation-state. But presenting a complex and contested vision of the past is not a universal goal. This set of books demonstrates that even those most removed from current academic historiographic trends have been profoundly influenced by efforts of the last 40 years to present a more inclusive past. Transnational themes, the environment, and an expanded, less-state centred definition of politics are also evident to varying degrees in most popular studies examined here. These books also provide evidence that not all historians have abandoned the project of synthesis for specialized or narrow case studies, and that it is possible to approach this goal with creativity and appeal that will reach a wide audience of general readers and academic historians. Still, it is little wonder that there are projects waiting to be done; we continue to wait, for instance, for a 21st-century academic historian to produce a short historical synthesis of New Brunswick. Bold and brave is the academic historian who embarks on this daunting task.

SUZANNE MORTON