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Jeff A. Webb

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Culture, Art, and the Sense of Place

PIONEERS, COMMODITY PRODUCTION, AND POLITICAL ECONOMY once dominated the historiography of the Atlantic Provinces. Attention to popular culture came much later, and it was then usually understood either as examples of the oral transmission of tradition or of an antimodernist impulse implicit in mature capitalism. Each of the Atlantic Provinces is different from its neighbours, and regions within provinces often share more in common with regions in other provinces than they do with other parts of their own provinces. The four books under consideration here – Michael Eamon's *Imprinting Britain: Newspapers, Sociability, and the Shaping of British North America*; Janet Kitz's *Andrew Cobb: Architect and Artist*; Kirk Niergarth's *The Dignity of Every Human Being: New Brunswick Artists and Canadian Culture between the Great Depression and the Cold War*; and Darrell Varga's *Shooting from the East: Filmmaking in the Canadian Atlantic* – span provinces, including some outside "Atlantic Canada," as well as several cultural forms, from newspapers to architecture and painting to filmmaking.[1] As such, they provide interpretive opportunities that transcend the "regional." While a few 20th-century historians reduced culture to manifestations of class struggle, or the ephemera of ethnic performance, the authors of these books take cultural products seriously on their own terms.[2] This set of books about the cultural work of artists, architects, printers, and filmmakers show scholars engaging with the most recent scholarship of the cultural realm. They also embody the authors' thoughts about the ways in which the local engages with the tendrils of globalism. They make for rewarding reading beyond our own communities.

Historians have always been comfortable reading texts from the past as sources, and in recent decades have considered the process through which the text was created as well as its content. Michael Eamon's *Imprinting Britain* delves deeply into the history of 18th-century print culture in two British colonial capitals: Halifax and Quebec City. These two colonial outposts are not often considered together. The subtitle of the book signals that it is a study of "newspapers, sociability and the shaping of British North America," indicating a shift in emphasis from the content to the medium of transmission – from the cultural cargo to the vessel that carries it. Locally produced culture receives less of Eamon's attention, as the colonial elites he examined continue to mentally inhabit the British world.

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[1] Michael Eamon, *Imprinting Britain: Newspapers, Sociability, and the Shaping of British North America* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015); Janet Kitz, *Andrew Cobb: Architect and Artist* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2014); Kirk Niergarth, *The Dignity of Every Human Being: New Brunswick Artists and Canadian Culture between the Great Depression and the Cold War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015); Darrell Varga, *Shooting from the East: Filmmaking in the Canadian Atlantic* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015).

[2] Gerald M. Sider's *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) is an influential study of culture as class relations. The body of work of Helen Creighton stands as an example of collecting and popularizing traditional culture; see, for example, Helen Creighton, *Bluenose Ghosts* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1957).

Jeff A. Webb, "Culture, Art, and the Sense of Place," *Acadiensis* XLVI, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2017): 201-206.

It is unclear to me why these two ports were chosen for analysis, except for the rich vein of sources that Eamon deploys in his study. The result is a comprehensive study of newspapers and pamphlets in two garrison towns on the northern periphery of the Thirteen Colonies in the period after the American Revolution. It is a substantive contribution to the historiography of print in colonial America as well as that of proto-Canada, not the least because it surveys two towns that historians in the United States rarely include in their analysis. Halifax was, of course, a Royal Navy base, on a peninsula that had been ceded by the French not many years previously. Quebec had an English administration that was surrounded by a French-speaking population. The book gives little sense of the two colonies beyond the social lives of the English male bourgeoisie; as Eamon points out, women, First Nations, French speakers, and many others were rarely addressed or discussed in newspapers and pamphlets. Interestingly, the author uses newspaper accounts to reconstruct some of the cultural life in the theatres and coffee shops that historians sometimes treat as silos. In this account readers are made aware of which plays were being performed, along with the papers and pamphlets that were undoubtedly being read and discussed. This fuller picture of cultural life is helpful. It does, however, raise the questions (more easily asked than answered) of how broadly the print culture circulated. Were women reading the papers? Were members of the Francophone bourgeoisie and clerics reading them? Did literate people read to the illiterate?

Drawing upon Habermas, and other cultural theorists, Eamon's attention to the social role of print is valuable to our understanding of colonial culture. This is not matched, however, by equal attention to the content of the papers, except when they were articulating British and Enlightenment values. One prominent theme in this book is the ways in which print was used to allow the local elite to continue to feel part of the British world – making them part of the British conversation in much the same way as they would have been in one of the provincial cities in the United Kingdom. What is less clear is the extent to which the people in Halifax and Quebec were kept aware of trends in the Thirteen Colonies. Setting aside the Loyalist residents, whom we might expect to have followed political and social developments in their former homes, I imagine that many other 18th-century readers would also have been interested in the cultural and intellectual lives of their southern neighbours. It might be anachronistic to expect the emergence of a local intellectual culture in these colonial towns in the 18th century; the appendices in *Imprinting Britain* show that London theatre and literature dominated public leisure in these towns. A nationalist historiography might overlook the rich engagement with Britain that Eamon ably documents, and focus attention instead upon the emergence of local concerns and literature in the 19th century.

British popular culture dominated the social and cultural lives of many in the late 18th-century colonies. By the early 20th century, however, Canadian artists, notably painters, were endeavouring to break from the European themes even as they looked to them for ideas. The Group of Seven looms large in the history of Canadian painting, not the least for establishing that the Canadian natural landscape could be a subject for a national artistic tradition. But as Kirk Niergarth demonstrates, for some "Maritime" artists in the early 20th century the Group of Seven was a stultifying model. Artists in the Maritimes, particularly in Saint John, New Brunswick, rejected Group of Seven landscapes and worked to forge a socially relevant art that represented the urban poor with dignity. In contrast to the conservative taste for rural scenes and nature painting, or the sort of antimodernist aesthetic in the 1930s that Ian McKay has examined,[3] Niergarth documents Depression-era artists who were socially engaged in working class urban neighbourhoods. It was not the socialist realism of the early Soviet Union that Maritime artists emulated; New Brunswick painters of murals instead were inspired by the Mexican Marxist Diego Rivera. The artists and their patrons (a more complete cultural history would reveal the role of patrons who made it possible for artists to produce their work) meant that the murals were to be seen by the working class people. Niergarth finds that "New Brunswick artists combined modern stylistic innovations with the methods of 'old masters,' particularly painters of the Renaissance" (20). The result was not a Stalinist socialist realism, but a realism of social life. The carefully rendered images of contemporary people captured people's dignity while they lived under degrading economic conditions. More importantly, the artists portrayed a hopeful future to which viewers could aspire.

Art is sometimes written about as if it were autonomous from social class, although it is as often written about as a commodity within a market as well as a form of artistic expression. Michael Denning's excellent book *The Cultural Front* reveals how American artists became politically engaged in the popular front in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s.[4] No such rich interaction of artists and the Communist Party existed in Canada, although Niergarth has accomplished something similar to Denning. Niergarth's *The Dignity of Every Human Being* combines attention to aesthetic values and formalism, the social context, and the ideological work of the era. These areas are often written about separately, and each has its own historical literature. Niergarth eschews such silos, and the result is a book that draws upon the history of art, social history and cultural history. Like McKay's studies of cultural production in Nova Scotia, Niergarth's book should appeal to a broad spectrum of scholars.

Many of the New Brunswick murals have been damaged or destroyed in the years since their creation, and the artists' reputations submerged by more contemporary fashions among Canadian critics. The book illustrates how regional efforts to speak to social conditions through art were set aside so that the largest market would have all the resources. As the periodical *Maritime Art*, which had made the case for a socially relevant art, relocated to Ontario to become *Canadian Art*, it not only lost its regional focus but also lost the social criticism that had once animated it. Canadian artists competed with American and British cultural products, and had their own journal to champion the career of Canadian artists, but at the cost of no longer being relevant to the lives of working Maritimers. Its move westward to serve a larger community of artists and critics also marked a move toward measuring the value of painting by market criteria. Miller Brittain continues to be celebrated as a Canadian artist by art historians although some of his contemporaries have not fared as well as artistic celebrities, such as Jack Humphrey or Pegi Nicol MacLeod. Niergarth rehabilitates their reputations and, more importantly, recovers the rich history of social engagement by artists in New Brunswick. It would be interesting to have another study that examines the postwar emergence of a Maritime Realism, such as that exemplified by Alex Colville, that avoided the leftist critique of the Great Depression.

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[3] Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).

[4] Michael Denning *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: New York: Verso, 1997).

The decorative arts play a part in the lives of those with enough money to translate some of it to cultural capital, but we all live within the built environment. Architecture is also an area in which function, business, and financial factors shape the creative work as much as beauty. Janet Kitz's *Andrew Cobb: Architect and Artist* is a biography of a Halifax-based architect. Family members made it possible for Cobb to attend Acadia University in Wolfville, to study at the Ecole nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1907 to 1909, and to earn a master's in architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Known mostly for his residential designs, Cobb also created some notable public buildings in Nova Scotia, including Dalhousie University's Studley Campus, the first Provincial Archives building, and the Arts and Administration Building of the University of Kings College. He had a recognizable style, one that was influenced most clearly by the Arts and Craft Movement.[5] That movement reacted to industrial society not by embracing new materials and rejecting decoration, as did much of modern architecture, but by harkening back to preindustrial motifs and natural materials. When the paper mill town of Corner Brook, Newfoundland, was being planned by British industrialists, a town site inspired by the Garden City Movement in the UK, Cobb was hired to design the housing for mill managers and employees. Using local materials and methods, with "modern" amenities such as indoor plumbing and enamel bathtubs, tensions between tradition and novelty played out in different ways than occurred in outport vernacular housing of the era. Nicely written, with beautiful illustrations and copious details about Cobb's family's history, the book is an appealing introduction to the architect. Kitz's study serves as a welcome introduction to Cobb, but lacks the engagement with the scholarship that would have allowed her to make an analytical argument about his impact on architectural design in Nova Scotia. I came away from this book, though, with an appreciation for the artistic ability of Andrew Cobb. His drawings of the architectural features he studied in Europe are things of beauty and technical skill. I also would have liked to read more about the uses to which the buildings were put, as we have seen in the recent scholarship of Robert Mellin and Jerry Pocius.[6] Architecture is an enterprise that is affected by materials, financial factors, the needs of the clients, and the aesthetic vision of the architect. Furthermore, once a building is completed, those who use it also modify it. The symbolic and functional uses of the buildings are of as great an interest as the eyebrow-like dormer windows Cobb so often put in his roofs.

While Kitz missed an opportunity to offer a more fulsome exploration of Cobb's architecture, Niergarth's attention to aesthetics and business history is matched by Darrell Varga's nuanced study of film in Atlantic Canada since the 1970s. "Film" is a word often used differently than the word "movie"; the latter frequently refers to commercial products such as Hollywood entertainment while the former is often used to discuss a work of art. Running through Varga's *Shooting from the East: Filmmaking on the Canadian Atlantic* is the dichotomy between film as an expression of the characteristics of a specific place and efforts to achieve financial success. Filmmaking is a capital-intensive creative act, and requires a production team in contrast to painting, so with the modest size of the Canadian market the need for a profit has frequently resulted in films that are more suited to the pop culture tastes of Americans. From the perspective of a national movie industry that aspires to produce a profitable product by concentrating its efforts in central Canada and in British Columbia, "regional" art films that reflect the local of the Atlantic coast seem marginal propositions if not harmful distractions. Just as Maritime painters, with their local social concerns and internationalist ideology, became marginal, as Niergarth shows, to a national capitalist art market and national museums, Varga illustrates the tension between film as the performance of local culture and movies made for export to the American market.

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[5] Elizabeth Cumming and Wendy Kaplan, *Arts & Crafts Movement* (London: New York: Verso, 1991).

[6] Robert Mellin, *Tilting: House Launching, Slide Hauling, Potato Trenching, and Other Tales from a Newfoundland Fishing Village* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003); Gerald Pocius, *A Place to Belong: Community Order and Everyday Space in Calvert, Newfoundland* (Athens, GA and Kingston and Montreal: University of Georgia Press and McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

"Performance" is a key analytical concept in *Shooting from the East*. For Varga the films are not representations of some essence of an Atlantic Canadian culture; the popular culture of each community was constituted by the performance of the filmmakers and the audiences. Building upon the concept of region as described by Forbes in his work on Maritime regionalism, and as further articulated by Conrad and Hiller in their text on Atlantic Canada, Varga portrays the region as something that exists only to the extent that we share a common relationship with distant foci of power.[7] Eschewing the mystical essentialism of those who romanticize Atlantic Canada, Varga's clear and concise discussion of the concepts he employs is refreshing. Filmmakers in each province, and each major urban center, worked within a local as well as an international cultural and financial context. Rather than assuming the existence of a Newfoundland culture or a Martime culture, or some vague "sense of place," this study focuses upon the interplay of the local with the international cultural and economic terrain. Varga examines the concrete construction of popular culture, rather than assuming its existence and then describing that which it sets out to study.

Varga focuses upon filmmaking in several communities. The documentary films of the National Film Board (such as the Fogo Films) and the Hollywood productions set in Atlantic Canada (such as the 2001 film *The Shipping News*) receive less attention than artistic engagements with local communities by filmmakers who are part of their communities (such as the 1987 *The Adventures of Faustus Bidgood*). Based upon Varga's close viewing of the films, his archival research, and, importantly, his oral interviews with people in the industry, he recreates much of the history of filmmaking in the region. Without having read a similar study of Quebec filmmakers or those in Ontario or the West, I am not in a position to comment on the "uniqueness" of Atlantic Canadian filmmakers; but Varga was never making an argument about any essential unique quality. His point is to reflect upon the social and economic conditions, and the relationships of power, that are played out in the films, and how the local is constituted through the work of filmmaking.

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[7] Ernest R. Forbes, *Aspects of Maritime Regionalism* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1983); Margaret Conrad and James K Hiller, *Atlantic Canada: A History* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Shooting from the East examines many important films and filmmakers as well as some obscure films and little-known filmmakers – not in an effort to be a complete history of film, but to show the variety of visual expressions through key films. Drawing on the political economy of filmmaking, he argues that during the early years of the industry, the practice was underdeveloped "save for the exploitation of landscape consistent with an anti-modern framework" (10). Since the 1970s, however, Atlantic Canadian filmmakers have engaged with contemporary life and politics, including social dislocation and alienation, and these artists and their films are the subject of this book. Each of the four provinces receives attention, and the author is knowledgeable about the cultural communities in Halifax, St John's, Saint John, and Charlottetown. Rather than writing a homogenizing treatment of "the region," as people sometimes put it, Varga provides insightful commentary upon filmmakers' work and the commonalities and differences that become apparent through the case studies. The book also provides critical commentary on many films; it is a critique in the sense of an informed discussion of themes in the films rather than finding fault in them or the inane rating of movie reviewers.

The goal here is to shed light upon the ways in which "images of the place are made and the ways that concepts of identity are enabled in a conversation between culture, place and citizenship" (13). Varga's preference is for "art films" because they are made for the community more than they are made for the international market, and thus they more effectively reveal how the work generates a sense of place. He focuses close attention on the film co-ops, rather than Hollywood-style film studios, that are characteristic of the industry in eastern Canada. The co-operation of the artistic community, rather than the lone auteurs, defines the productions, although Varga also gives due credit to many pioneering filmmakers such as Sylvia Hamilton, Michael Jones, and William MacGillivray. His clear thinking and evenhanded treatment are exemplary of the best of cultural history.

I am encouraged to see scholars of Atlantic Canada attend to the production of culture. Each of these authors conceives of *culture* as something actively made by artists, rather than something mystical, inherent, or passively transmitted from forebearers. These authors have added significantly to what we know about the imaginative life of those who lived in the Maritimes and Newfoundland. Each of these four authors has explored the dialectic between the local and the global, and between the factors of production and the creative impulse. In the books by Niergarth and Varga we see artists working within the social and economic structures in Canada. Eamon demonstrates the cosmopolitan nature of colonial intellectual life at a time when there was little local intellectual production. Kitz shows a Halifax architect who worked with the international artistic forms of the era to create something that was up-to-date but that also referenced the past. Niergarth and Varga, in particular, have written significant books on the 20th century cultural history of the Maritimes and Newfoundland. They emphasize the creative impulse and the social engagement of artists, rather than the desire for and political conservatism that is inherent in cultural preservation.

JEFF A. WEBB