"NOTHING, OF COURSE, EVER HAPPENS DOWN THERE": ATLANTIC CANADA IN THE NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

PROFESSOR CONRAD (Professor Emerita) holds degrees from Acadia University (BA Honours History 1967) and the University of Toronto (MA 1968 and PhD 1979). A member of the History Department of Acadia University from 1969 to 2002, Professor Conrad held a Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Canada Studies at the University of New Brunswick from 2002 to 2009. She also served as an adjunct Professor of History at Dalhousie (1992 to 2002) and held Nancy's Chair in Women's Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University (1996-1998). She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1995, received the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal (2002), Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal (2012), and is an Officer of the Order of Canada (2004). In 2011 she received the Society for Digital Humanities Award for outstanding achievement in computing in the Arts and Humanities. She is currently Professor Emerita at the University of New Brunswick where she continues to explore aspects of Digital Humanities with the support of the Electronic Text Centre. She has published widely in the fields of Atlantic Canada and women's history.

ABSTRACT

The title of this paper is derived from a comment by Frank H. Underhill in *The Image of Confederation*, published in 1964. By that time, the Atlantic Provinces had become identified as the "sick man" of Canada, lagging behind the rest of the nation in economic growth. Underhill used this flimsy justification as an excuse for excluding the Atlantic region from his discussion, a common practice among policy makers and scholars of Canadian history. Exclusion from the national narrative is perhaps preferable to what often passes for analysis of the region. This paper probes the "mistaken identities" that bedevil Atlantic Canada and argues that the nation would benefit from paying more attention to the region located "east of Canada."

INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper is derived from a comment by Frank H. Underhill in *The Image of Confederation,* published in 1964.[1] By that time, the Atlantic Provinces had become identified as the "sick man" of Canada, lagging behind the rest of the nation in economic growth—the only measure, it seems, by which societies are now judged. Underhill used this flimsy justification as an excuse for excluding the Atlantic region from his discussion, a common practice among policy makers and scholars of Canadian history. Exclusion from the national narrative is perhaps preferable to what often passes for analysis of the region. I have written elsewhere on the role that "mistaken identities" have played in shaping negative perceptions of Atlantic

Canada.[2] In this paper, I probe these perceptions and argue that our nation would benefit from paying more attention to the region located "east of Canada."

I base my argument on several assumptions:

- First, identities in the Atlantic region are deeply rooted. They were forged in the long eighteenth century (1689 to 1815), a period punctuated by a series of devastating wars fought on the region's soil and in which Aboriginal peoples and Acadians were marginalized. Between 1763 and 1850 the region was resettled by new immigrants, most of them from Great Britain, Ireland, and other colonies in North America. The Maritimes (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island) are the only provinces in Canada that took their final geographical shape before Confederation, shapes that resemble the small New England states more than their counterparts across Canada, including Newfoundland and Labrador, which is territorially larger than Great Britain or Japan.

- Second, what constitutes a region is always fluid, subject to shifts in communications, cultures, migrations, political regimes, and trade patterns. Despite assertions to the contrary, Atlantic Canada has never been frozen in time, but continues to change and evolve.

- Third, well-respected scholars have made a convincing argument that Atlantic Canada is not a region in any functional sense. Writing in the late 1970s, J. Murray Beck could find no regional identity at all—only provincial ones.[3] Others have gone even further, claiming that identity exists primarily in Atlantic Canada's own untidy regionalisms. Mi'kma'ki, Acadie, Africadia, Cape Breton, and Labrador are only the most obvious examples of regions that exist within, across, and beyond provincial boundaries.

- Fourth, the Atlantic Provinces offer little by way of a unique culture. While a regional affinity might manifest itself as friendliness in distant communities where Atlantic Canadians have migrated to find work, it leaves few traces of a distinctive legacy from a beloved homeland. This should come as no surprise. Notwithstanding a family resemblance due to their geographical origin, Atlantic Canadians have been full participants in creating a shared continental culture in which they are easily assimilated.

It is thus necessary at the outset to acknowledge that "region" and "regionalism" are slippery concepts, reflecting shifting cultural and historical contexts.[4] The two terms also need to be distinguished. While the Atlantic "region" can be easily found on a map, "regionalism" implies a political stance, a consciousness of a shared outlook that can be summoned up when other structures—familial, communal, provincial, national, global—fail. Calls for a union of the Maritime or Atlantic provinces have been voiced by policy makers desperate to find a quick fix for real or imagined ills, but no such union has ever materialized. This outcome suggests not only that there are other powerful identities in Atlantic Canada competing for dominance, but also that regionalism has limited value as a vehicle for common action.

Finally, it is important to understand what is meant by the names applied to the region. While the term "Maritime Provinces" was coined before 1867, "Atlantic Canada" and "Atlantic Provinces" only came into common use after Newfoundland (Labrador only became part of the official name of the province in 2001) joined Confederation in 1949. Many observers make the mistake of labelling Newfoundland and Labrador as a Maritime Province. It is not and its differences from the Maritimes cannot be casually dismissed.

CREATING IDENTITIES

Notions of conservatism and backwardness permeate scholarly and journalistic commentary on the Atlantic region. One of the most egregious examples was published in 2002 by political scientist Barry Cooper who asserted, as a matter of "fact," that "stagnation and decadence remain the most prominent features of premodern communal life to have survived into the present in the Maritimes" (by which he meant Atlantic Canada).[5] Cooper offers little evidence to back up this claim, but such comments serve to consolidate second-class citizenship. As a victim on a personal level of unflattering assumptions based on my geographical origins when I lived in Toronto in the 1960s, I can attest to the harm that such attitudes inflict.

If Atlantic Canadians are more conservative and backward than other North Americans, how do these traits manifest themselves? Those who favour

the conservative stereotype point to the comparative reluctance of Atlantic Canadians to support radical political movements; the tendency of the region's artists and creative writers to cling to realism; and a commitment to the notion of welfare state liberalism in social policy. Scholars who dispute this view emphasize the region's leadership in the movement for responsible government; pitched battles between capital and labour in the coal, fish, and forest industries; radical efforts by the region's governments to impose modernization through resettlement programs, sweeping municipal reform, and state-run enterprises; and the success of its world-class entrepreneurs, among them K.C. Irving, Frank Sobey, Harry Steele, Craig Dobbin, and Harrison McCain. Clearly, the wiser course is to concede that Atlantic Canada is a complex region with a history long and deep enough to accommodate any academic prejudice.

For the most part, policy makers and scholars outside the region follow Underhill in ignoring the Atlantic Provinces.[6] This tendency was established at the time of Confederation when the blueprint for British North American union was under discussion.[7] During the Confederation debates in the colony of Canada, the "Lower Provinces" were rarely mentioned and the concerns of the Maritime delegates expressed in the negotiations leading to political union were often discounted, part of the reason why Prince Edward Island missed the party in 1867. By holding out until 1873, the "Cradle of Confederation" secured a better deal from Ottawa than was initially offered, but Prince Edward Island was still a small jurisdiction in an expanding transcontinental empire.

The marginal position of the Maritimes in Confederation was reflected at the outset in the name of the new nation, the choice of its capital, the "Canadian" make-up of its civil service, and the balance of provincial representation in the Senate. When the western provinces were added to the mix, the influence of the Maritimes was further diminished. Small gestures were made to accommodate regional protests—the 1915 agreement whereby no province in Canada was to have fewer elected members of parliament than senators and the Atlantic Provinces Adjustment Grants established in 1958 are good examples—but the general trends continued to prevail. With small populations, the Maritimes had neither the revenues necessary to sustain their provincial governments nor the clout in the House of Commons to determine regional policy. Market forces, meanwhile, ran rampant, sucking money, people, and power to growth centres elsewhere.[8] When Newfoundland joined Confederation, the union agreement stipulated that a royal commission would be established to determine what level of assistance was needed to maintain adequate public services while keeping taxes comparable to those of the Maritime Provinces, not Canada as a whole. The regional fix was in.

Beginning in the 1950s the governments of the four Atlantic Provinces have cooperated among themselves to achieve common goals, and Ottawa has established equalization programs and various regional development agencies to kick-start economic growth. In 1982 the have-not provinces achieved a victory of sorts in Article 36 of the Constitution Act committing governments to the principle of equalization, but this article has never been invoked in the courts to improve conditions in the Atlantic region. The current state of provincial coffers in the Maritimes suggests that the time has come to test the potential of this constitutional commitment.

CANADA WITH A DIFFERENCE

In matters of public policy, the interests of the Atlantic Provinces inevitably take a back seat to more powerful regions, a process thoroughly documented in research by E. R. Forbes, Donald Savoie, and others.[9] Canada might well be a different place if the Atlantic region played a larger role in framing national policies. Let me offer a few examples:

- The Atlantic Ocean is an integral part of the Atlantic region. Although its fish, oil, and tourist potential are well-known to other Canadians, national policy has never really engaged these assets in the same way as, for example, Iceland and Norway do. The crisis in the fisheries, which threw 30,000 people in the Atlantic region out of work in the early 1990s, made headlines and brought much-needed financial assistance from Ottawa, but had this tragedy occurred elsewhere in Canada, the threat posed by climate change and irresponsible resource exploitation in the nation's oceans would figure more prominently in national policy. Indeed, the likelihood of Prince Edward Island being largely submerged by rising ocean waters over the next century would be the subject of sustained national attention.

- The Atlantic region serves as an uncomfortable reminder that unfettered market forces often fail. While Newfoundland and Labrador no longer receive equalization payments—the province has the third highest per capita income in Canada—the Maritime Provinces are less well-off. Now that Ontario is also a recipient of equalization, we hear less about abandoning the policy put in place by Ottawa in 1956 to ensure a basic standard of living for all Canadians no matter where they lived, but "equalization" is still a dirty word in the neo-liberal vocabulary. Even the economic meltdown of 2008, when governments propped up a system riddled by greed and irresponsibility, failed to stop ideologues from preaching that less government is the best government. This in a country where the richest 86 Canadians have more wealth ($178 billion) than the people of New Brunswick ($141 billion).[10] Since the gap between rich and poor is not only manifested geographically across regions but is also embedded in class, ethnic, and gender relations, it is important to sustain an activist state that encourages a better balance in the distribution of the nation's bounty. A good place to start in any effort to address regional disparity is with a discussion of the impact of "per capita" thinking, which has inflicted hardship on small provinces since 1867. The upcoming changes to the Canada Health Transfer, which will remove provincial income level considerations now in place, promises to have disastrous consequences for the Atlantic Provinces, where population has remained constant over the past two decades while other regions have grown in numbers.

- Atlantic Canada scores well in many indices measuring quality of life, a tribute not only to the success of equalization but also to the values that many of the region's citizens share with other Canadians. For whatever reasons—the tragic circumstances experienced by so many of its founding peoples, a commitment the social gospel promoted by its Christian churches, an inclination to neighbourliness in its relatively small communities—the Atlantic Provinces are often cited as a good place to raise a family and to escape the fast pace that defines more prosperous jurisdictions. Rosemary E. Ommer and Nancy J. Turner go further, suggesting that the practices developed in the region's informal rural economies may well serve as models for a world preoccupied by unrealistic visions of economic growth.[11]

CONCLUSION

Since the 1950s, scholarship on the history of Atlantic Canada, much of it published in the journals *Acadiensis* and *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, has proven Underhill wrong. A lot has happened in Atlantic Canada but the research is slow to make its way into larger narratives of Canadian history. It will be interesting to see how the region fares in the books, exhibitions, films, and websites commemorating the 150th anniversary of Confederation. On matters of public policy, the question before us as we approach 2017 is how to bring issues of equity and environmental integrity into the forefront of the national conversation. Ultimately, it must be acknowledged that people living in Atlantic Canada in the twenty-first century enjoy a standard of living well above the global average, but the challenges we face as citizens of this embattled planet underscore the urgency of bending the arc of history in significant new directions.

NOTES

1 Frank H. Underhill, *The Image of Confederation* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1964), 63.

2 Margaret Conrad, "Mistaken Identities? Newfoundland and Labrador in the Atlantic Region," *Newfoundland Studies* 8, 2 (Fall 2002): 159-174. This paper draws heavily on arguments raised in Margaret R. Conrad and James K. Hiller, *Atlantic Canada: A History* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2010).

3 Murray Beck, "An Atlantic Region Political Culture: A Chimera," in David Jay Bercuson and Phillip A. Buckner, *eds*, *Eastern and Western Perspectives: Papers from the Joint Atlantic Canada/ Western Canadian Studies Conference* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 147–68. See also David Alexander, *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays on Canadian Political Economy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press/Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1983), 144-45.

4 On the challenges of writing on Atlantic Canada, see Ian McKay, "A Note on "Region," in "Writing the History of Atlantic Canada," *Acadiensis* XXIX, 2 (Spring 2000): 89–101, and James K. Hiller, "Is Atlantic Canadian History Possible?" *Acadiensis* XXX, 1 (Autumn 2000): 16–22. See also "Forum: Reimagining Regions," *Acadiensis* XXXV, 2 (Spring 2006): 127-62.

5 Barry Cooper, "Regionalism, Political Culture, and Canadian Political Myths," in *Regionalism and Party Politics in Canada*, eds. Lisa Young and Keith Archer (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002), 97.

[6] E.R. Forbes, "In Search of a Post-Confederation Maritime Historiography," *Acadiensis* VIII, 1 (Autumn 1978): 3-21; W.G. Godfrey, "Canadian History Textbooks and the Maritimes," *Acadiensis* X 1(Autumn 1980): 131-35; John G. Reid, "Toward an Elusive Synthesis: The Atlantic Provinces in Recent Writing on Canadian History, *Acadiensis* XVI, 2 (Spring 1987): 107-121; and Phillip A. Buckner, "Limited Identities" and Canadian Historical Scholarship: An Atlantic Provinces Perspective," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 23, 1 &2 (Spring/Summer 1988): 177-98.

[7] Phillip A. Buckner, "The Maritimes and Confederation: A Reassessment," *Canadian Historical Review* LXXI, 1 (March 1990): 1-30.

[8] Sean T. Cadigan, "Regional Politics are Class Politics: A Newfoundland and Labrador Perspective on Region," *Acadiensis* XXXV, 2 (Spring 2006): 163-68.

[9] E.R. Forbes, *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1989) and Donald J. Savoie, *Visiting Grandchildren: Economic Development in the Maritimes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

[10] David Macdonald, "'Wealthy 86'so flush they could buy New Brunswick," CPPA *Monitor* 21, 1 (May 2014), 1.

[11] Rosemary E. Ommer and Nancy J. Turner, "Informal Rural Economies in History," *Labour/Le Travail* 53 (Spring 2004): 127-57.

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