

Recent Island History

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ligious development of Nova Scotia in the revolutionary era will cast into relief the kinds of questions which should be asked about the subsequent growth of the Baptist, Anglican, and other churches in Nova Scotia.

G.S. FRENCH

Recent Island History

Since the ground-breaking scholarly works of Frank MacKinnon¹ and Andrew Hill Clark² in the 1950s there have been few serious published contributions to the historiography of Prince Edward Island. The 100th anniversary of entry into Confederation provided the occasion for the appearance of several publications, some of which merit close examination. The most ambitious of these is *Canada's Smallest Province*, a volume sponsored by the "Prince Edward Island 1973 Centennial Commission" and edited by Francis W.P. Bolger. It consists of 13 chapters: nine concerning the period ending in 1873 which are divided chronologically, and four on the Island's Canadian century, organized thematically.

The editor himself has contributed seven of the chronological chapters³ and it is in the first three that he presents new material. They cover the years from 1767 and the division of the colony into 67 townships of approximately 20,000 acres each, to 1842 and the electoral defeat of the Escheat movement which advocated forfeiture of estates for non-fulfillment of the granting terms. Bolger has provided the most detailed scholarly account thus far of the politics of these 75 years: the characters of the lieutenant-governors are deftly portrayed, and their achievements and failures are estimated; the repetitious and complicated colonial legislation and imperial policies on the land question are clearly delineated; the agrarian radical William Cooper is at least partially rescued from undeserved obscurity; and light is shed upon several other dark corners of Island history. Yet serious shortcomings remain. Without exception the focus is upon relations between the governors and their superiors in London. The Islanders themselves scarcely intrude. We are occasionally informed of their numbers, but little else. Virtually nothing is revealed about their ethnic origins, their reasons for immigrating to the Island, their locations, their occupations, their religions, their

1 *The Government of Prince Edward Island* (Toronto, 1951).

2 *Three Centuries and the Island: A Historical Geography of Settlement and Agriculture in Prince Edward Island, Canada* (Toronto, 1959).

3 See Bolger, ed., *Canada's Smallest Province: A History of P.E.I.* (Charlottetown, 1973): Ch. 2, "The Beginnings of Independence, 1767-1787"; ch. 3, "Land and Politics, 1787-1824"; ch. 4, "The Demise of Quit Rents and Escheat, 1824-1842"; ch. 6, "Nation Building at Charlottetown, 1864"; ch. 7, "Prince Edward Island Rejects Confederation, 1864-1867"; ch. 8, "The Coy Maiden Resists, 1867-1872"; ch. 9, "The Long Courted, Won at Last".

educational levels, or their relations among themselves. The land question, surely of paramount importance for the economy and society of the colony, is treated in the narrowest possible terms, as an administrative problem. We receive only hints of differences between absentee and resident owners, and learn nothing of landlord-tenant relations except that such governors as Sir Charles Fitzroy believed the proprietors should grant liberal terms to their tenants, and that this gratuitous advice was indignantly rejected. The central role of the land agent and the cultural roots of popular resistance to proprietary rule are ignored. Surely it is of some significance that eastern Prince Edward Island, which by the mid-1830s was dangerous territory for land agents, surveyors, lawyers, and law enforcement officers, was populated largely by Highland Scots, with a sprinkling of Southern Irish, both of whom had had ample experience with landlordism. There may be some justification for this limited approach to the land question during the earliest years, when there were few colonists⁴; there is none at all in the 19th century, and especially after 1830, when politics ceased to be the preserve of tiny and unrepresentative factions. The development of non-agricultural sectors of the local economy (e.g. the sudden boom in the timber trade after 1808 and the later spectacular development of shipbuilding) is not even mentioned.⁵ This being the case, there is of course no explanation of their linkages with the proprietary interests. Yet the Island's elite was distinguished for its close integration; nothing occurred comparable to the split in New Brunswick between official 'placemen' and the most powerful propertied elements in the community. The small scale of Prince Edward Island and the unique (for English-speaking British North America) feature of a neo-feudal land system present the historian with exciting opportunities. In these chapters the challenge has not been met or even acknowledged, for Bolger has made no effort to move beyond the repertory of Colonial Office correspondence to examine social life and institutions.

4 Yet even this is doubtful when one considers the impressive work done in Nova Scotian history concerning limited numbers of settlers: Winthrop Bell, *The 'Foreign Protestants' and the Settlement of Nova Scotia* (Toronto, 1961) and Andrew Hill Clark, *Acadia: The Geography of Early Nova Scotia to 1760* (Madison, 1968). Within the context of Island history itself, Bolger, although leaning heavily on D.C. Harvey's study of a political society which flourished for a short period, ignores the same author's work on early social conditions, and even his readily-accessible collection of travellers' accounts. See Harvey, "The Loyal Electors," Royal Society of Canada, *Proceedings and Transactions*, 3rd ser., XXIV (1930), Section II, pp. 101-110; Harvey, "Early Settlement and Social Conditions in Prince Edward Island," *Dalhousie Review*, XI (1931-32), pp. 448-461; and Harvey, ed., *Journeys to the Island of St. John or Prince Edward Island 1775-1832* (Toronto, 1955).

5 See Basil Greenhill and Ann Giffard, *Westcountrymen in Prince Edward's Isle: A Fragment of the Great Migration* (Toronto, 1967), pp. 28-29, 92-93, 194-197, where the authors suggest that "for many decades the Colony lived by shipbuilding for markets in Britain and other British colonies and by the earnings overseas of its own ships"; and Greenhill, "Thomas Burnard Chanter," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. X (Toronto, 1972), p. 161.

Bolger devotes his remaining chapters, almost 100 pages, to the years 1864-73, or, more accurately, to the story of the Island's entry into Confederation. There is very little here that did not appear in his monograph, *Prince Edward Island and Confederation 1863-1873*⁶ and indeed much, if not most, of the material comes directly from the earlier work. Information uncovered in the intervening nine years is poorly integrated into the narrative. For example, although Bolger acknowledges the publication of Charles Tupper's minutes of the Charlottetown Conference,⁷ he ignores the evidence Tupper presents that the Canadian delegates were initially admitted in the third session rather than the first, as historians had generally believed. He apparently prefers as testimony George Brown's letter of 13 September 1864 to his wife; no explanation is given for this choice of authorities, although Brown was writing more than ten days after the fact. Yet the issue is of some importance since Tupper's record strongly suggests that Maritime Union, the original rationale for the conference, was seriously discussed. Other themes of the 1860s and early 1870s receive only the most perfunctory mention. The land question virtually recedes from view, except when the Tenant Leaguers complicate relations between the Colonial Office and the local government. Bolger makes major errors when he attempts to move beyond the narrow confines of the confederation issue and explain the ways in which it was entangled with the school question. He asserts, for example, that a pivotal reason for the Conservative victory in the last election prior to Confederation was the publication "early in the campaign" (p. 216) of a draft bill in which the Tories pledged aid to sectarian educational institutions. In fact, the document in question was not published until two months *after* the election; thus the Protestant clergy and the electorate in general can scarcely be portrayed as responding to it during the campaign. This and several other errors of fact and sequence in dealing with the relationship between the school question and the confederation movement make Bolger's account unreliable. The explanation lies in his uncritical acceptance of the partisan and undocumented work early in this century by Father John C. Macmillan, who frequently jumbled chronology to make a case.⁸

The other chronological chapters are a study of the years from 1842 to 1861 by W.S. MacNutt, and a three-part survey of the period prior to 1767.⁹

6 Charlottetown, 1964.

7 See Wilfred I. Smith, ed., "Charles Tupper's Minutes of the Charlottetown Conference," *Canadian Historical Review*, XLVIII (June 1967), pp. 101-112.

8 See John C. Macmillan, *The History of the Catholic Church in Prince Edward Island from 1835 till 1891* (Quebec, 1913).

9 See Bolger, ed., *Canada's Smallest Province*: ch. 5, "Political Advance and Social Reform, 1842-1861," by MacNutt; ch. 1, "The First Centuries," comprising "And in the Beginning . . ." by John H. Maloney, "The French Regime, 1534-1758," by Nicolas de Jong, and "Rule Britannia" by Douglas B. Boylan.

In the latter, John H. Maloney presents a well-written, sympathetic, and unpretentious portrait of Micmac life before the coming of the European; Nicolas de Jong tells the familiar and rather unhappy story of the French regime; and the final section is a very thin four-page account of the years between 1758 and 1767, whose inclusion as a separate sub-chapter scarcely seems justified.¹⁰ MacNutt, in his chapter on the middle years of the 19th century, provides insights into a variety of subjects left untouched by the editor, such as educational developments, sources of friction between landlord and tenant, and diversification of the economy. The political struggles of the period are generally portrayed in terms of social class. The well-born, the educated, and the wealthy were the Tories; those who did not meet this description were the Reformers. Yet MacNutt does not systematically develop the argument and thus does not explain why George Coles, a successful entrepreneur of Anglican background, similar in many ways to the men of 'Family Compact,' became leader of the tenants' party. In short, MacNutt's class analysis is flawed by his failure to explore the possibility that, for the most material reasons, members of the same class could have radically opposing interests on the central class issue of the day, the land question.¹¹ Strong sympathy for the Compact also leads him on occasion to make bizarre judgements; at one point he describes the "party of the landowners and their agents . . . [as] men who enigmatically represented vested proprietorship yet stood as the champions of a toiling tenantry." (p. 116) Such puzzling statements and an apparent inclination to believe the worst about those who, like Coles or the governors Sir Henry Vere Huntley or Sir Alexander Bannerman, fell afoul of the Compact, make MacNutt's chapter weakest when dealing with politics.

The remainder of the book consists of four loosely-connected and uneven chapters.¹² Mary Cullen provides a well-researched and illuminating survey of the perennial problem of communications between the Island and the mainland; Frederick Driscoll capably reviews the attempts by successive Island governments to obtain revision of the financial terms of union and

10 The justification may be quite pragmatic; the book is a government-sponsored project, and the author is identified as Clerk of the Executive Council and Secretary to the Provincial Cabinet.

11 See Ian Ross Robertson, "George Coles", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, X, pp. 183-184, where it is argued that Coles' position as a manufacturer of consumer goods (beer and spirits) requiring a mass market with widespread purchasing power led him to oppose a land system which squeezed money out of most Island farmers and inhibited the production of agricultural surpluses which, as well as being exchangeable for cash, could bring an increase in rent or eviction without compensation. In contrast, the most characteristic elements of the Compact (land agents, lawyers and merchants) had been spawned by the land system, and believed their interests to be linked to its stability.

12 See Bolger, ed., *Canada's Smallest Province*: ch. 10, "The Transportation Issue, 1873-1973" by Mary K. Cullen; ch. 11, "The Island and the Dominion" by Frederick L. Driscoll; ch. 12, "Island Politics" by Marlene-Russell Clark; and ch. 13, "Economic and Social Development since Confederation" by Lorne C. Callbeck.

compensation for the inequitable effects of national policies; under the guise of economic and social history Lorne Callbeck publishes an assortment of odds and ends largely drawn from his book *The Cradle of Confederation*¹³; and Marlene Clark contributes a disjointed and poorly-written chapter on Island politics, which rarely rises above the level of anecdote. The miscellaneous character of these thematic chapters reflects the lack of cohesion in *Canada's Smallest Province* as a whole. In many respects it is a poorly-conceived book, compiled with unmistakable signs of haste. No explanation is given for its unorthodox plan of organization (partially chronological and partially thematic, with no over-all unity), and no justification is advanced for the disproportionate amount of space devoted to the decade between 1864 and 1873. Some of the contributions do not merit publication, and several others require much editorial work. This is a disappointing volume, one which does not fill the need for a comprehensive scholarly study of Island history.

*The Island and Confederation: The End of an Era*¹⁴ is an attempt to place the Island's entry into Confederation in its contemporary context. The authors, Hary Baglole and David Weale, have devoted more than half their book, which is divided into two 'parts', to a survey of Island history in the British colonial period. The importance of Walter Patterson and his era is persuasively argued; the development of the Island's economy is ably sketched. There is an excellent, and all too short chapter on the land question; and the Islanders themselves, their ethnic and religious roots, their hardships and achievements, remain at the centre of the story. But above all the authors argue that there was an almost constantly-growing sense of community, of being an 'Islander' first and foremost. It was this local patriotism which was challenged by the confederation movement, and the second part of the book portrays the reluctance with which Islanders entered the union. Indeed, it is argued that between 1864 and 1873 they were not simply holding out for a better offer, "prior to Confederation, a large portion of the Island population had little or no interest in discussing or negotiating terms." (p. 129) While it is undeniable that there was a highly-developed sense of local patriotism in the Prince Edward Island of the 1860s and 1870s, the authors seem to have taken the overblown political rhetoric of the day rather too seriously. Stanislaus Perry, for example, stated in 1867 that if Confederation came to the Island he would emigrate — if he did not take up arms.¹⁵ When Confederation did come, he chose neither option, but instead became a Liberal candidate for the House of Commons.

It is of course impossible at this remove to measure precisely just how determined Islanders were to avoid Confederation, or to discover exactly the

13 Fredericton, 1964.

14 Summerside, 1973.

15 Baglole and Weale, *The Island and Confederation*, p. 128; also see pp. 103-104, p. 137.

relative importance of the various reasons for their reluctance. But there is cause to suspect that the argument in the second part of this book has focussed too much on the Island's supposed psychological state, and too little on the land question. To take one prominent case: it was not at all certain that Coles would oppose Confederation until he learned at the Quebec Conference that Canada did not intend to buy out the proprietors. At that point he declared that the other delegates "might as well strike Prince Edward Island out of the constitution altogether."¹⁶ On the other hand, he had stated in 1863 that he would support any plan of union which would include provision for the extinguishment of proprietary rights.¹⁷ For many others as well as Coles, the Canadians' adamant refusal to deal with the Island's major grievance must have been decisive in 1864-65.¹⁸ And the fact that in 1866, after the Tenant League disturbances, the Islanders themselves were able to purchase the Cunard estate, which represented more than 15 percent of the Island's land mass,¹⁹ must have confirmed their belief that they could get on fully as well without Canada. Yet such considerations are absent from this account of the Island's response to Confederation. Other questions remain unexplored. Were Irish Roman Catholics more hostile to Confederation than their fellow-colonists, as they were in New Brunswick, where the word 'union' appears to have provoked bitter memories of the union between Ireland and Great Britain?²⁰ With the notable exception of Edward Whelan, this appears to have been the case. But there is no indication of such distinctions in the second part of *The Island and Confederation*; in this respect, at least, the Islanders are treated as an undifferentiated mass.

Baglole and Weale themselves constitute part of the living tradition of Island patriotism. In response to elaborate official preparations to celebrate the centennial of entry into Confederation, they founded in late 1972 a patriotic society whose purposes were to remind Islanders of their distinctive heritage and to urge them to consider their contemporary situation in this light. Cornelius Howatt, one of the two assemblymen to oppose Confederation in the final vote of 1873, provided the name for the new organization, the 'Brothers and Sisters of Cornelius Howatt.' One of their projects was a pamphlet series of biographical sketches of Island historical figures, and the first

16 Cited by Bolger, "Prince Edward Island Rejects Confederation, 1864-1867," in Bolger, ed., *Canada's Smallest Province*, p. 164.

17 See Bolger, *Prince Edward Island and Confederation*, p. 25; and Robertson, "George Coles," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, X, pp. 186-187.

18 At the census of 1861 only 40.4 percent of the occupiers of land were freeholders; calculation based on Clark, *Three Centuries and the Island*, p. 95, Table III.

19 Calculation based on *ibid.*, p. 52.

20 See W.S. MacNutt, *New Brunswick: A History, 1784-1867* (Toronto, 1963), pp. 427-428.

to appear, written by Weale, was a study of Howatt himself.²¹ The pamphlet is a successful attempt to recreate the mental universe of the rural anti-Confederate. It is a well-written and sensitive portrait of a man whose only previous historical reputation had been as a stubborn obstructive. Stubborn and obstructive he may have been, but Weale persuasively argues that these attributes were grounded in deep attachment to the Island and its traditions. The second pamphlet, by F.L. Pigot, focusses on John Stewart (1758?-1834), who was a substantial landowner, the receiver general of quit rents for a generation, Speaker of the Assembly thrice, and the Island's first historian.²² Pigot's account is vivid and informative. He convincingly portrays Stewart as a hot-tempered, impetuous brawler who wielded enormous power and influence for more than a generation. He is described as "an Island Warwick" (p. 19) and this characterization seems apt. Over the first 55 years of the Island's existence as a separate colony, only one lieutenant-governor, Edmund Fanning, was not recalled in disgrace at the behest of the Stewart family, and this relative success was the result of allying himself with them. Pigot's work is an invaluable addition to the limited historical literature on a murky period in Island history.

The author of the third pamphlet in the series, Wayne E. MacKinnon, has incorporated much of his material on J. Walter Jones, Liberal Premier from 1943 to 1953, into an official history of the Liberal Party of Prince Edward Island.²³ The book-length study contains much information not found to be elsewhere, and, considering its origins, is remarkably candid. Yet it is of uneven value. For the period prior to 1880 it relies heavily and indiscriminately on secondary sources, consequently reproducing their mistakes and biases. For the years from 1891 to 1965, the narrative, written mostly from primary sources, greatly advances our understanding of both the Liberal Party and such personalities as Jones, the Peters brothers, Alexander W. Matheson, J.H. Bell, and Donald Farquharson. Finally, in dealing with the current regime of Alexander B. Campbell, all critical faculties desert the author, who moves

21 The Cornelius Howatt Commemorative Series (which is expected to continue):

No. 1, David Weale, *Cornelius Howatt: Farmer and Island Patriot* (Summerside, 1973).

No. 2, F.L. Pigot, *John Stewart of Mount Stewart* (Summerside, 1973)

No. 3, Wayne E. MacKinnon, *J. Walter Jones: The Farmer Premier* (Summerside, 1974).

The founders have been active on other fronts as well. For example: Baglole co-authored with Ronald Irving "The Chappell Diary"; an historical play on pioneer conditions in P.E.I. in the 1770's, which had a spectacularly successful run in Charlottetown in the summer of 1974. For an excellent documentary history of B.S.C.H. movement, see Baglole and Weale, eds. *Cornelius Howatt: Superstar!* (n.p., 1974).

22 *An Account of Prince Edward Island on the Gulf of St. Lawrence* (London, 1806).

23 *The Life of the Party: A History of the Liberal Party in Prince Edward Island* (Summerside, 1973). MacKinnon is a former private secretary to Premier Alexander B. Campbell, who apparently suggested the project, and who has provided an introduction.

from the realm of history to that of public relations.²⁴ There are several major flaws in this book: the copious information is not easily accessible, owing to the lack of an index, an adequate table of contents, or even descriptive chapter headings, there is neither documentation in the form of footnotes nor a bibliography, and the absence of an editor is apparent throughout. To the factual errors of his secondary sources MacKinnon has added a disconcerting number of his own: for example, Joseph Pope assumes the name of his second son (p. 19), Governor Sir Donald Campbell becomes the historian Duncan Campbell (p. 20), the Liberal percentage of the popular vote in 1891 is confused with the percentage of parliamentary seats taken by the Liberals (p. 67), Liberal Premier H.J. Palmer is given his grandfather's name (pp. 79-80), and did Whelan really die "literally of a broken heart"? (p. 45) Nevertheless, despite all these criticisms, MacKinnon has put us in his debt by producing an account which is frequently absorbing and usually reliable. The book's virtues make it all the more regrettable that he has not systematically identified his sources, particularly since some of his informants are already dead.

Several other works of interest to Island historians appeared in 1973. They range from works of reference²⁵ to highly specialized scholarly studies²⁶ to the entire issue of a national magazine²⁷ to numerous local histories. This flurry of activity has added considerably to our knowledge of Prince Edward Island. Yet nothing has emerged comparable to the scope and depth of scholarship in the books by Clark, Frank MacKinnon, or D.C. Harvey.²⁸ It is still to these pioneers that the serious student must first go to learn the contours of Island history.

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24 For a more realistic (although incomplete) appraisal of Campbell's 'politics of purpose,' see David Cayley, "Underdeveloping Prince Edward Island: The P.E.I. 'Development Plan,'" *This Magazine*, VIII, no. 3 (Aug-Sept. 1974), pp. 3-7.

25 Toponymy Study 1, Alan Rayburn, *Geographical Names of Prince Edward Island* (Ottawa, 1973).

26 Ronald D. Tallman, "Annexation in the Maritimes? The Butler Mission to Charlottetown," *Dalhousie Review*, LIII, no. 1 (Spring 1973), pp. 97-112.

27 *Canadian Antiques Collector*, VIII, no. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1973).

28 *French Régime in Prince Edward Island* (New Haven, 1926).