

Town, Port, and Country: Speculations on the Capitalist Transformation of Canada

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to broaden the scope of the research.

Taken together these volumes tell us something about the significance of the Irish in Canada. *The Sash Canada Wore* suggests that Orangeism grew and spread because its tenets were shared by the bulk of the Protestant population. Might it be, however, that non-Irish Protestants became increasingly Orange Irish in perspective and outlook? In the case of New Brunswick, *In Search of Political Stability* shows, indirectly, the importance of the Green as an intermediary between English-speaking Protestants and French-speaking Catholics. The Canadian Irish require further examination by historians, for both Orange and Green played crucial roles in the evolution of Canada.

WILLIAM M. BAKER

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IT IS ONE OF THE IRONIES of Canada's intellectual history that while we have produced and sustained a political economy tradition renowned for its perspective on *aspects* of the material development of a staples-dominated social formation, we nevertheless know little about the character of the great transformation of 19th century economic life. In town, port, and country, and across a diverse but interconnected set of regions and sub-regions, capital worked its magic in ways that were as uneven and as unequal as they were ubiquitous. The result was that social relationships in such settings were restructured, revamped as the means and methods of appropriation and accumulation changed with a never-ending parade of technological refinements, alterations in the colonies' standings vis-à-vis England and world markets, shifting demands for particular products, and rising and falling class and geographical fortunes that expressed themselves in the essential disorder of political experience.

This is what lies at the very foundation of the last decade's research into the specifically Canadian "limited identities" of region and class. We now know so much more about such experiences (and about other "limited identities" rooted in gender, age, and ethnicity) that it may appear uncharitable to argue, as I will here, that our understanding of social development and regional essence is based on an inadequate appreciation of the connectedness of experience — social, economic, political — that were moulded into and forged a totality over the course of the 19th century. However different and divergent such settings and processes appear, they were not entirely hived off from one another. In the large transformation affecting them all, drawing out unique but parallel forms of resistance, resides a history encompassing the regional and the social but extending beyond them, into the political economy of Canada as a whole, and its

place in the international capitalist order.

Few are the recent works in regional and social history that address themselves to the 19th-century experience in this way. Here I want not so much to review certain books (all of which deserve lengthier individual assessments) as to speculate on how one might perceive a history of town, port, and country given the essential absence of any attempt to link up histories of such discrete, if interdependent, entities.

Years ago H. Clare Pentland began the process of considering the history of 19th-century Canada in this way. In a series of articles published in the late 1940s and in the 1950s, and in an unpublished 1960 Ph.D. thesis, Pentland wove together a powerful analytic assault upon the blindspots of the political economy tradition, particularly the failure to consider the emergence of labour as a commodity in an industrial-capitalist Canada. Now revised and published as *Labour and Capital in Canada, 1650-1860* (Toronto, James Lorimer, 1981), Pentland's thesis was no less than an attempt to explore the ways in which the land and its products, the consolidation of a home market through the integration of regions by canals and railways, the recruitment and disciplining of labour, the early use of the state to protect class interests, and the transformation of morals, values, and behaviour attendant upon the rise of a society oriented toward property and profit all conditioned vast changes that swept Canada along the road to an Industrial Revolution. Unique in his appreciation of the significance of the 1840s and 1850s as years of transition away from the commercial capitalism of a rurally-dominated staples economy and into the more urban forms of advanced industrial production, Pentland was also rare in his implicit insistence that town and country were essential halves of a vital whole. Agricultural and forest surpluses fueled the drive for canal construction that facilitated urban and rural commercial interests; the largely non-urban work sites of canal and rail construction were stocked by Irish immigrants, whose adaptation to the impersonality of labour on these public works projects fed into the creation of a propertyless class dependent upon wages for a livelihood; the consequent economic diversification, origins of a Canadian state and beginnings of economic policy, population growth, and closing of the land frontier confirmed a society governed by acquisitive individualism rather than a paternalistic ethos, stratified along class, rather than ethnic, estate, or local compact, lines.

Labour and Capital in Canada is thus a concise conception, if not a full history, of the great transformation affecting all of 19th-century Canada. To be sure, it is now dated (by some of the very works considered below), is marred by archaic and stereotypical views of particular ethnic groups, and is particularly inadequate in its treatment of the Maritimes. Pre-confederation Canada, in Pentland's depiction, is an industrializing economy of manufacturing town and country hinterland, but it has only the most shadowy commercial parts. Yet for all of its failures, no recent work even approaches *Labour and Capital in*

Canada in the force of its interpretive sweep.

Two recent articles, in Donald Akenson, ed., *Canadian Papers in Rural History, Volume III* (Gananoque, Ontario, Langdale Press, 1982) provide a series of correctives and refinements upon Pentland's original statement but do little to alter fundamentally the basic lines of argument presented in *Labour and Capital in Canada*. R.M. McInnis's "A Reconsideration of the State of Agriculture in Lower Canada in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century", takes a revisionist swipe at the literature on landed society in French Canada and its potential in the years leading up to the collapse of the 1830s and 1840s. While McInnis's reconsideration challenges many of our assumptions about Lower Canada's "agricultural crisis" — assumptions that received an early if sketchy airing in Pentland's work — it hardly overturns the analysis of *Labour and Capital in Canada*. Indeed, in suggesting that Lower Canadian agriculture may well have been weak, not because of the collapse of crops and the wheat staple, but because of market deficiencies, McInnis is himself demanding that town and country be viewed as reciprocal agents, as did Pentland.

Urban and rural life are scrutinized from another vantage point in Donald Akenson's already influential "Ontario: Whatever Happened to the Irish?", soon to be a book-length study. Pentland pioneered discussion of the Irish as the very substance of the formation of a propertyless wage-labouring class in Canada's 1840s and 1850s. Akenson provides a more sophisticated and impressively quantitative discussion of the Irish migrations. He is quick to pillory Pentland and others for their poor use of problematic evidence, for their objectionable if not racist stereotyping, and for their quickness to generalize. The history of the Irish will never look the same after the devastating assaults mounted in this article. Nevertheless, for all the wind expended in Akenson's logical restatement of the contours of Irish immigration, Pentland's way of looking at capitalist development and the Irish contribution to the labour market remains standing. Akenson is convincing that the Irish, as the largest ethnic group in 19th-century Ontario, were not simply an urban people: only 13.6 per cent of the Irish-born lived in cities in 1861, a further 12.0 per cent in towns of under 2,000 population, and a majoritarian 74.4 per cent in rural settings. Yet four in ten Ontario city-dwellers in 1871 were of Irish descent, and as the poorer Irish in rural settings struggled to eke out a living on marginal holdings where access to markets was restricted and crop yields severely limited, many were driven to the harshest forms of subsistence farming supplemented by seasonal waged work. Not all of the rural Irish were contented and settled farmers; town and country would, as Pentland long ago claimed, play their mutually reinforcing part in structuring the Irish into a place of prominence in the formation of the Canadian working class. Some sense of this generalized process emerges out of several recent works that are untouched by Pentland's perspective, but that establish and elaborate upon slices of the broad experience explored by *Labour and Capital in Canada*.

Graeme Wynn's *Timber Colony: A Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth Century New Brunswick* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1981) will already be familiar to readers of this journal, and it will repay close attention with a wealth of information on the profound and accelerating pace of economic change in New Brunswick between 1800 and 1850. What is remarkable is that in spite of the lack of the usual benchmarks of "progress" — population, urban growth, prosperous farms, cleared acreage — this "wilderness region" was experiencing changes not unlike the supposedly more dynamic Upper Canada/Canada West. There, of course, land policy, the booming of the wheat frontier, expanding farms, masses of immigrant Irish, and the construction of canals all stimulated economic diversification and fostered the growth of a propertyless wage-earning class. Wynn takes us through parallel, if different, developments in early New Brunswick, marshalling impressive evidence of the region's dependency on export markets, and the close connections between merchant princes and emerging industrial capitalism in the sawmilling sector, where technological change, capital necessities, and labour requirements all drew stark lines separating out merchants, traders, and millowners from their workers. Power was concentrated in the hands of timber barons, with a former Haligonian, Joseph Cunard, dominating the south bank of the Miramichi and clannish Scots' firms controlling sections of northeastern New Brunswick. This consolidation of authority was not unlike that attained by Col. Thomas Talbot in Upper Canada's western district or D.D. Calvin on Garden Island. In New Brunswick economic diversification was undoubtedly stunted, but the general "constriction of individual opportunity, and the decline of yeomanly independence with the emergence of a powerful entrepreneurial class and a growing proletariat" (p. 137) was an outcome similar to that taking place elsewhere. And, as in other regions, it had been fostered by early colonial authority and its policies. As Wynn concludes, "forest regulation . . . reinforced an increasing domination of the timber trade by large, well-capitalized enterprises that were able to take advantage of technological improvements in the lumber industry and profit from the economies of scale and the enhanced economic stability conferred by the extent of their interests" (p. 149). Across the region, from the nascent industrial centre of Saint John into the old cleared settlements and river valleys of the assaulted forest, timber and its uses had initiated a complex economic transition toward industrial capitalism in a comparatively under-developed colony.

In Peel County, Canada West, the 1851 Census recorded 24,816 resident individuals, or roughly 12 per cent of the entire population of New Brunswick at mid-century. These people are the subject of David Gagan's *Hopeful Travellers: Families, Land, and Social Change in Mid-Victorian Peel County, Canada West* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1981). Gagan has pursued these men, women and children in the hope of discovering how families in rural situations coped with these years of transition to industrial capitalism. To be sure,

Gagan does not pose the question in this way and while he has room in his bibliographic section on "society and economy" for Carl Berger, Harold Innis, A.R.M. Lower, and P.B. Waite, Pentland is conspicuous by his absence. Gagan is concerned primarily with the demographic record of Peel County in the years 1845-1875, and his argument about social change borders on demographic determinism. Those present at the outset of Peel's settlement were those most likely to succeed to affluence and it was persistence that paid, not the privileges of ethnocultural background or the zeal of entrepreneurial talent. The silver-lined success of the settled, however, had its cloud: intergenerational pressure on the land and the desire of established farmers to retain a grip on their families' well-being led to over-reliance on wheat specialization in a decade — the 1860s — when that particular staple no longer brought the economic bonanza it had in the past. The result was a rural crisis, in which the old beliefs and faiths in the family farm, sustained by abundant and cheap land and the labour of the conjugal unit, came tumbling down in the cumulative catastrophes of constricting markets, declining yields, falling wheat prices, shrinking farm size, and rural depopulation. The sons and daughters of Peel's "hopeful travellers" departed in desperation, many of them to the urban magnet, others to the new wheat frontier of the west.

It is impossible to do justice to all of Gagan's empirical findings here for he presents a wealth (and like many quantitative studies, at times a maze) of statistical data on Peel's people. Their household compositions, fertility, mortality, transience, property ownership, and occupations are presented in a stream of 60 tables that at times reduce the text to an accompaniment. Yet this is vitally important new research, and will provide grounds for significant debate in the years to come. What is important, however, is that Gagan's empirical evidence demonstrates how the critical years of transformation in Canada West were experienced on the land. He confirms the early alienation of land in the 1830s and the place of speculation and land policy in the creation of Upper Canadian fortunes and class structure. In the ensuing years families devised strategies that attempted to offset the more debilitating consequences of wheat's boom in the 1840s and 1850s, when land prices soared and sons were threatened with restricting opportunities, and the collapse of the 1860s, as rural society itself faced overwhelming uncertainties. Over time household size declined, families became more persistently simple (signifying the disappearance of relatives, visitors, boarders, and hired help), and the percentage of farm families containing dependent children and young adults rose faster than it did among non-farm families. The birth rate dropped and marriage began to be delayed until later ages. These are the demographic contours of a society of constricting opportunities and deteriorating potential. One moment in the historical development of those forces pushing people into wage labour and closing the door on self-sufficiency, the expansion and contraction of the wheat monoculture provided the agricultural surplus that stimulated economic growth, set the stage for rising

land prices that forced the newly-arrived into the labour market, and finally structured its offspring in the same direction as the promise of rural Canadian life faded in the face of pressures it could not absorb and would have to deflect.

Gagan's contribution is to have illuminated all of this, and to have lent it a concrete empirical dimension lacking in our historiography. This is no small accomplishment, but in the end it is necessary to depart from his interpretation. Focusing on the demographic response to crisis, *Hopeful Travellers* reifies the experience of population. Non-farm employment opportunities are judged to depend more on population movement than on the structures of a market society (p. 109), and the vast complex of change engulfing mid-19th century society recedes into the background. In his closing chapter Gagan concludes that "The role of the family was the critical bonding agent. Decisions made within the family in the light of historical experience, present realities, and future expectations, decisions made independently because the family and no other agency was responsible for its destiny, decisions taken by whole societies of families in different places and at different times but under similar circumstances and, therefore, with predictably similar effects, were the primary agents of change and continuity in individual experience" (p. 157). To view the history in this way is to see a reaction to structural change as the essence of the capitalist transformation, to pose an overly voluntarist conception of historical process, and to reduce collective experience to a seemingly endless collage of individual choices. Such an interpretive framework blurs the power *some* families hold over others, and the structural and institutional implications of that power and its consequent authority, into the haze of a pluralist past.

A corrective to such a skewed reading of the mid-19th century years of capitalist transformation is Brian Young's *George-Etienne Cartier: Montreal Bourgeois* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1981). Young provides a captivating view of the close connection between political and economic power in this period, a connection consolidating in the city but penetrating into the country. Born to a mercantile family with connections to the land, Cartier led a life as mobile, shifting, and self-centred as did Gagan's "hopeful travellers". But as one of those notaries whose reputation had been established in the *patriote* upheavals of 1837-38, Cartier moved, not from farm to farm, but through the streets, backrooms, and court corridors of Montreal, where he played his clients and the real estate market to good advantage in the years 1840-1860. His marriage was a failure and his attention to his children paled in comparison to his close and affectionate relationship with his mistress, Luce Cuvillier, a woman whose passions, besides Cartier, included trousers, tobacco, and George Sand. It was not family that dictated the choices Cartier made, but the acquisitive individualism and conspicuous consumption of the bourgeois age.

To that end Cartier played a key role in orchestrating those developments in political and economic life that would consolidate the new order. He was at the very centre of Macdonald's conservative coalition, and federalism and railways

were the twin engines of the driving political economy of the 1850s and 1860s. Dominating Montreal politics by the mid-1850s, he had abandoned his *patriote* sympathies of the 1830s to take his place in the realignments of the post-1849 years. His political strength stemmed from his influential role in bringing together wealth, power, and tradition, forging an alliance between Montreal's francophone bourgeoisie, the English-speaking elite, and the influential prosperous wing of the Catholic Church. Serving the interests of the Grand Trunk Railway, Cartier was a pivotal link in the chain that connected the early Canadian state to railway construction, culminating in Confederation. He revamped the legal code and orchestrated the abolition of seigneurial tenure, paving the way for land and labour to emerge as purchasable commodities. Cartier was thus yet another "hopeful traveller" in these mid-Victorian years of transformation, but his pursuit of economic development, social stability, and a centralized hierarchical state encompassed social rather than individual ends, and consolidated power in class, not family, terms. As an active agent in the creation and rationalization of a capitalist Canada he was one of those figures of authority who charted the course of history by equating property with progress and by developing institutional structures to constrain and accommodate those who could not or would not accept the order needed to preserve that equation. A bourgeois gentleman with a country estate, his actions and his life defied any simple rural-urban dichotomy. He supervised legislation relating to municipalities, interest rates, roads, mortgage practices, land tenure, and railways. He knew the industrial interests of Montreal well, and like any mid-century bourgeois, he was as much concerned with commerce as he was with commodities, sitting as harbour commissioner and overseeing port facilities. What can we say about the ports of Canada in these years of change?

Indeed, with recent publications of the Maritime History Group, the question is what can we not say, within specific clearly defined limits, about shipping and economic development in Atlantic Canada? Led by the late David Alexander, and sustained by the research skills and editorial perseverance of Rosemary Ommer, Eric W. Sager, Lewis R. Fischer, and Gerald Panting, the Maritime History Group has marshalled a vast array of general and specialized papers, published annually as the *Proceedings of the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project Conferences*. The range and methodological sophistication of this project have pioneered new assessments of port life in a Canada caught in the throes of capitalist transformation. Use of ship logs and crew agreements allows the group entry into productivity of labour and capital in the maritime trade, measured in terms of faster sailing time, increased vessel size, and economies in crew selection and exploitation. This productivity was improving dramatically in the 1870s, even in the 1880s, suggesting the culmination of years of developments that paralleled shifts in urban and rural life elsewhere in the young Dominion. As in rural Canada West, where wheat specialization fed into an inability to adapt to changing circumstances, the Maritimes experienced years of crisis

following upon these advances in productivity. The 1890s witnessed the failure of regional entrepreneurs to adapt to the new trade and technological imperatives of an age of iron and steam, a process of demise linked to state policies derived in central Canada. As Sager, Fischer, and Ommer conclude in *Merchant Shipping and Economic Development in Atlantic Canada* (St. John's, Maritime History Group, 1982): "The greatest opportunity cost of our landward National Policy was an economic and political vision dimly realized and rapidly foregone: it was the loss of a national economic structure in which the resources and skills of the Maritimers were integrated with those of the western settlers, each serving the other in the common pursuit of international markets; it was the loss of these vital links with our European heritage which our trade and our fleets once sustained; it was the loss of the skills of those maritime entrepreneurs who did not live to see our descent into economic dependence; it was the loss of the indigenous culture of a people who lived by the sea" (p. 28).

This kind of perspective, informed by a commitment to broad Maritime regional interests and a staggering compilation of data, raises vital questions about power and development, about dependency (and when was the region *not* dependent?), about class, and about the reciprocity of experience in town, port, and country. It would be impossible to cover the many issues raised by the Maritime History Group's prolific members. Here I want merely to take Douglas North's summary remarks at the 1981 Atlantic Canada Shipping Project Conference as a platform upon which to rest some comments germane to the capitalist transformation of mid-19th century Canada. North took some exception to what he regarded as the Maritime History Group's lack of theory, its neglect of the role of the state, its passing over the revolution in values and interpretation of property rights that was so enormously important in 19th-century life, and, finally, the tendency in the project to bemoan the deterioration of regional self-sufficiency: "You are always in the position of regretting that you did not do as well as the rest of Canada; the fact that you have done better than ninety percent of the world has not entered your calculus at all" (p. 236). With all of this there can be little disagreement, but North was also appropriately deferential to the Maritime History Group's data base, and warned that comparisons of economic growth across regions would be problematic, inasmuch as the Project would have to explore the rest of Canada much more thoroughly. That, he thought, they would not want to do.

Perhaps not, and it is not for a displaced central Canadian working-class historian, now resident on the west coast, to tell the Maritime History Group what to do. They have been pursuing an understanding of regional economic development with a rigour rare in academic life. Still, North's criticisms, in conjunction with his hesitancy about inter-regional comparisons, sticks in the side of social and regional historiography like a contradictory thorn. For how can a more theoretically-poised history, attendant to the role of the state and the conditioning of a complex set of cultural, legal, and attitudinal developments con-

ductive to capital accumulation, develop out of a purely regional approach? These are matters, in Canadian history, that cut across and through regions in common if uneven ways. The task, surely, is for all of us concerned with the capitalist transformation of 19th-century Canada to begin to appreciate this interconnectedness of town, port, and country, to begin to build, theoretically, upon empirical studies like those of the Maritime History Group to explore the common process of development.

That process will of course be composed of peculiarities, of regional and sub-regional histories uniquely their own. But it will also encompass shared experiences that, in different ways, structured the people of the past in directions both different (in terms of specific paths) and similar (in terms of the general outcome). It should no longer be possible for Canadian historians to avoid discussion of how specific crises in agricultural life and in regional experience restructured the political economy of the nation as a whole, consolidating power and authority in particular hands and determining the future destinies of large blocs of our population. It was through such developments that the social formation of 19th-century Canada was formed, embedded deeply in basic inequalities and relations of subordination cutting along lines of class and locale. To approach the history in this way is to attempt to comprehend the regional and the particular forms of capital accumulation and class conflict that were consequently produced across Canada within the context of the capitalist transformation of town, port, and country. In this sense historical analysis and economic development over time share a certain symmetry, for individual choices made in the past by those Saint John shipbuilders, hopeful travellers, and Montreal bourgeois that we have looked at through particular studies always unfolded within sets of limits determined by larger and more impersonal structures of possibility established by capital and commodity movements. Such movements took place within regions, but were influenced by much larger, indeed international, settings, just as they were fueled by class interests.

The value of all of this work is that it takes us closer to an understanding of this essential feature of 19th-century economic life. But it does so only in the limited forum of specialized examinations of discrete slices of historical experience. Canadian social and regional history thus have some hard choices to make in the future. They can remain limited in their appreciation of the "limited identities" of the past or they can reach out to grasp Pentland's sense of totality, filling the many holes and gaps of his premature but venturesome view of Canadian capital and labour with the empirical findings of the last decade. That done we will not only have a fuller and more materialist sense of the capitalist transformation of Canada, we will also gain a greater understanding of the particular experiences that together form the general contours of 19th-century life in town, port, and country.

BRYAN D. PALMER