

Canadian History, New Yet Familiar

J. E. Belliveau

Volume 22, Number 2, Spring 1993

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad22_2rv03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Belliveau, J. E. (1993). Canadian History, New Yet Familiar. *Acadiensis*, 22(2), 161–168.

Canadian History, New Yet Familiar

IT WAS A COINCIDENCE THAT, as my personal library was being culled, the editor of *Acadiensis* dropped some 20 pounds of new Canadian history on me in the form of what the trade calls quality paperback texts. Coming at a time when people in ten provinces and the territories were gagging over the entrails of endless constitutional wrangling, these new books represented a fresh trend, a new approach to the country's origins and development. This packet of literary team-work takes us 12,000 years from the aboriginal crossing of the Bering Strait to the long night of Meech Lake. Done by professional historians writing in groups, this parcel of history consists of two sets of two books each. The pairs are divided into before-and-after Confederation volumes, and there is one single volume work which is also done by group production.

The two sets of textbooks, *Origins* and *Destinies* and *Colonies* and *Nation*, came as a kind of revelation to one who has been reading Canadian history haphazardly through an adult lifetime. Somewhat beyond the category of traditional popular history, these collections might be categorized as easily readable, solid secondary research, done with authority and without the sometimes constricting weight of earlier scholarship. The texts are aimed at university students and general readers and offer what must be called an enlightened overview of the full range of Canadian history. To an undisciplined long-time pursuer of local, provincial and national history, these works have the quality of putting together in clear perspective not only the great events and the special interests of academics, but comprehensive social history, some political history and the bits, pieces and personalities. In a way, they interpret the work of the earlier specialists, each writer staying within an individual area of expertise, making it accessible and often actually entertaining to read. One of the impressions left by reading our history in two distinct eras, before and after Confederation, is that the latter period is seen as so short a span in the country's whole development. It is made clear that we did not spring up full-grown as a nation.

The books in question are *Origins: Canadian History to Confederation* (Toronto, Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1992) by R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones and Donald B. Smith and *Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation* (Toronto, Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1992) by the same authors; and *Colonies — Canada to 1867* (Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992) by David Bercuson, Kerry Abel, Don Akenson, Peter Baskerville, J.M. Bumsted and John Reid and *Nation — Canada Since Confederation* (Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992) by J.L. Granatstein, Irving Abella, T.W. Acheson, D.J. Bercuson, R.C. Brown and H.B. Neatby. These are physically heavy volumes, weighing in at some two pounds apiece, though attractive covers make them look less formidable. However, the prize of the package is *The Illustrated History of Canada* (Toronto,

Lester Publishing, 1991), edited by Craig Brown. It combines the writings of Arthur Ray, Christopher Moore, Graeme Wynn, Peter Waite, Ramsay Cook and Desmond Morton and does in 555 pages what the twin sets manage in twice that many wider and longer pages.

While examining these books, I was also pondering an old pamphlet that turned up in culling my old library. This one contained a lecture delivered by the early 20th century New Brunswick historian, Dr. J. Clarence Webster. Given on Founder's Day at Mount Allison in 1922, the lecture was on "Present Day Aspects of Canadian Nationalism". Long before television, when radio broadcasting was just emerging, Webster was darkly concerned about our ignorance of Canadian history and his fellow countrymen's "reliance on Britain and the United States for books and magazines". He illustrated this by saying that Annapolis Royal "was the most historic spot in North America north of the Gulf of Mexico, for there was European civilization first established". Yet, he added, "this fact means nothing to the great mass of people. Had Americans been in possession of Annapolis Royal, it would have been even more highly regarded than Plymouth, Massachusetts, or Jamestown, Virginia. Here, where the French Acadians first settled and where the Loyalists came 150 years later, was a place which in the United States would have been a sacred spot, the scene of pilgrimages and celebrations".

Beside the Webster pamphlet lay a grade-school text entitled "A Public School History of England & Canada". Prescribed by the Education Department of New Brunswick, selling for 30 cents, it was printed by Copp Clark of Toronto in 1901. It or its immediate successor was the seventh-grade bible of one's own school days. Here were all the British chestnuts from Alfred the Great (without his burnt cookies), Hengist and Horsa, 1066 and all that, but precious little of Canada.

The point is made because, between that kind of "Canadian" history and the academic spate poured out between 1940 and 1960, nothing of the character of the present new wave of comprehensive and thoroughly readable Canadian history had turned up anywhere. So these products of recent scholarly team-work gave this reviewer the sense of re-living, or indeed living, Canadian history.

To begin with *Origins* is to notice that the continent's pre-European period gets somewhat short shrift. Still it is enlivened by anecdotes and human touches. Then, later the Bristol fishermen get slight attention although the Portuguese and first French do better. The sort of aside that makes these books appealing is one such as the interpretation of the name Labrador ("lavrador"). To learn it earlier had taken this reviewer to an ancient church in Portugal where a plaque dedicated to Christ-the-worker used the word and led to the explanation that "lavrador" was a farm labourer.

From the beginning, the maps and general illustrations of this volume create a vivid impression. The layout follows the unusual plan of putting page numbers in the side margins rather than at top or bottom. This makes for much simpler reference. The prints, sketches and pictorial reproductions are not only attractive but instructive. To older readers raised on textbook engravings of Doughty, Jeffreys, Harris or Benjamin West, these bring a whiff of nostalgia. Throughout the twin sets

of pre- and post-Confederation are inserted related-reading lists given in each chapter rather than packed into end-paper addenda. Students and amateur historians are well served by this system. There is also a "Time Line" offering relevant dates by periods so that scholarship may be combined with simple practicality.

The description of early trade patterns in *Origins* is hardly up to Harold Innis yet offers excellent summaries. In passing, it might be noted that the constant and unnecessary addition of "Roman" to every Catholic reference during the French exploration period becomes grating since what other kind of Catholic could be found on this continent at the time? On the other hand, it must be recorded that, for once, the French settlement in Acadia gets its rightful place, being there even before Quebec, and Clarence Webster would have been pleased.

The early European period is presented with the help of information made available more recently with new research methods. For instance, the work of religious orders in New France is seen in the context of its times rather than by trendy standards of politically correct gurus of the 1990s. There is a remarkable display of collaboration among the authors of this section, and also in the relation of Indian myths and legends which brighten the text considerably.

"By the early eighteenth century", the authors of *Origins* point out, "The residents of the colony called themselves 'Canadians' and some families had already been in Canada for two or three generations" (p. 87). Would that more Canadians in this time of soul-searching could appreciate this. Like the fact that Acadians were this country's first permanent European settlers, it would help them understand the depth of feeling in those who have known it as a homeland for a dozen or more generations.

The distinctions between Quebec and Acadian French are neatly summarized. The issue of Acadian "neutrality", the oath of allegiance and the tragedy of exile are all covered in a short section. There is missing only the story of those who escaped deportation between 1755 and 1758 by fleeing to the Miramichi and the offshore islands, to return a few years later to swear allegiance to the crown and, in effect, start a new province. A criticism of this part of the book is that its bibliography misses any reference to the name of Placide Gaudet, the historian-archivist, who was surely the best and foremost authority on the early Acadians and their families. Most of what others have written since his death early in this century results from the Shédiac native's lifetime of on-the-spot research.

The Nova Scotia settlement by Loyalists is usefully recorded, as is that in New Brunswick, but there is some peculiar language, i.e. "The most unsuccessful Loyalist settlements". Also, Machias, Maine, is referred to as "Mathias" and Champlain's original settlement on Dochet's Island as "Deschet's" — or were previous historians wrong?

The authors have done well to offer a fair survey of British rule under the Quebec Act and in spelling out the role of both seigneurs and French clergy in the early St. Lawrence's struggle to survive. This, and the competition with the 13 colonies to the south, Britain's worries about security in Quebec and the promotion

of free trade all provide a background for later — and indeed current — developments in the province.

Reading these new-trend books leaves the impression that if one had just waited one could have bypassed years of wading through stacks of often ponderous works by generations of “heavies”. In the batch under review, the collaborative writers have themselves done the heavy slugging. Moreover, they have added aspects and analyses not always found in previous Canadian histories. For example, there is an excellent chapter on Maritime trade in the late 18th century and early 19th which throws a new light on the region. Indeed, the chapters on the Maritime colonies and on Newfoundland are so gratifying as to elicit a cheer. Nothing seems missing and much that has usually been overlooked in the past stands out in relief. In a province whose current lieutenant-governor is considered a French-Acadian but whose direct New Brunswick ancestor, Michael Finn, came from Ireland to be the founder of Pokemouche, it is enlightening to find such intriguing bits of information included. As well, it can be said that the story of Maritime blacks has been long waiting to appear in a condensed and illustrative way within a national setting.

To a Maritimer who first travelled through British Columbia on a political junket in 1949, the history of exploration in that province comes in *Origins* as something quite new. That Captain George Vancouver should have had a connection with Louisbourg and Quebec may have been common knowledge to the savants, but it came here as a revelation, as did the reference to Spanish claims and Captain Cook’s adventures in the area. The meeting with bigger-than-life personalities foreshadows such later flamboyant characters as the Nova Scotian who became Amor de Cosmos and the New Brunswicker W.A.C. “Wacky” Bennett who ran B.C. in the 1950s from his hardware store in Kelowna.

In *Destinies* the value of explanatory inserts printed on a distinctive grey background is appreciated as early as the ninth page when a section entitled “The Meaning of the BNA Act” comes under the separate heading “Where Historians Disagreed”. This idea comes as a practical guide as the Confederation story unfolds in a rich variety of political, social and economic circumstances in a dramatic era. The text moves swiftly through the post-1867 period from Macdonald, Laurier and King to R.B. Bennett, Maurice Duplessis, the Quebec cardinals, Mike Pearson, C.D. Howe, on through Clark and Turner and on to Mulroney and Meech with the progression of a familiar tale told to the accompaniment of nostalgic music. Here and there the relation is enlivened by the summarized disagreements of previous historians, giving even fuller perspective to the narrative.

A striking feature of the first twin set, as with the second, *Colonies and Nation*, is the sense that so much has happened since 1900, and indeed within one’s own lifetime. It’s rather as if we hadn’t been watching closely as all this was happening and now someone has drawn attention to it all in a collaborative memoir. Because so much that makes today’s Canada has in fact occurred within a single lifetime, these books sometimes have the tone of first-rate national journalism, informed, intelligent and on top of events. This then is the intellectual product of mid-century

academic historians who have been combined with later electronic research methods.

As its foreword says, *The Illustrated History of Canada* is a single-volume story of "how Canadians have lived and worked and seen themselves, how they have thought of one another and how they have realized their ambitions in their several communities across generations of huge colonial empires and, more recently, as citizens of a nation in the international world".

If any single Canadian work covers more ground more effectively and accessibly than this book it has not come to the attention of this reviewer. Reading it straight through was like running across old friends and acquaintances, often known only superficially and now being properly introduced. To an undisciplined seeker after this country's *raison d'être* this text has the quality of putting it all together. In a way it summarizes Parkman and his reliance on the Jesuit *Relations*, through George Stanley on Riel, Hannay on the Acadians, Creighton on Sir John A., Lower on the Canadas, Wade on Quebec, Beck on Nova Scotia politics and MacNutt's New Brunswick. The only negative criticism is that the narrative is so compelling some scholars may say it is not sufficiently analytical. That is a matter for debate. What should be said is that the threads of our past are so well knitted together from one author and one chapter to another that it comes out almost seamless and might be gone straight through by a freshman student without the aid of a lecturer.

The black and white illustrations and the attractive cover painting by William Raphael have been chosen to strike a balance between the familiar and the little-known. Some are classical images of Canada's heritage for which there are no substitutes, while others are there for a certain novelty value. There is a wide variety of representation socially, geographically and even politically. There is even a marvellous picture-portrait of Northrop Frye, so life-like and pensive it might have been painted on a night in 1990, a few months before his death, when he sat and delivered his last lecture. It was at the University of Moncton on what would be his last visit to his hometown and to his mother's grave and he looked exactly like this.

The Illustrated History section on New France creates a more balanced and, yes, fairer, report than is often found. For instance, it is interesting to find a version of "les filles du roi" more likely true than so many romanticized or crudely sexist versions. Again, the social customs of the time and place are clearly shown to be the result of more recent research with new methods that clear up some of the myths.

In this general history, too little is said about the rise of the labour movement, with references confined mainly to the early 20th century and forgetful of the railways and printers' organizations of the previous century. On the other hand, the Laurier/Liberal era is put into good perspective and the U.S./Canada free trade background taken from that period is notably helpful in understanding current goings-on. Likewise, the Laurier/Borden influences on the First World War, our relations with Empire, conscription, the language question, relations between

Ontario and Quebec — all are set out in a scenario that should offer both professional and non-professional historians a thoughtful overview while giving the student a firmer foundation for understanding current events.

The Illustrated History's chapters on the Great Depression remind one that the less scholarly Pierre Berton has captured that period better than any of the academic historians.¹ To older Canadians, that decade remains close and affecting; one wonders how a newer generation can assess it. Later in this book, for those of us who lived as adults through the 1940-70 years, the chapters on the trials and triumphs of materialism constitute a wonderful summary of the time. Like people in all ages, we went through this one knowing, and yet not knowing. Watching it come together now as written history can be almost eerie.

One regret is that the references to Quebec in the 1950s and 1960s give only a surface covering. This section lacks depth and misses the revolutionary social changes of the post-Duplessis era which are fundamental to any understanding of today's French Canada. Indeed, the discussion of the general Canadian social changes of the 1960s, including the historic reforms in Louis Robichaud's New Brunswick, reads more like a journalist's summing up of newspaper files. It is done as though it were too soon to take account of the extraordinary results of changes in the entire Eastern Canada spectrum, but it isn't. The results have been obvious for a decade. On the Trudeau period, this form of quick and easy history becomes almost too glib and lacks a solid assessment of that regime. Nor is it too early to have learned the results, such as the far-reaching effects of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, with the drift away from parliamentary law-making to the making of law through the courts.

The two-volume set *Colonies* and *Nation* of course covers the same ground as *Origins* and *Destinies* but a distinctive tone is set with the opening of *Colonies*. It conveys an excitement and the sense of precariousness of Canadian formation and existence, a sense that has resonance with today's Canadian temperament. As the preface says, "Major issues facing Canada today are: the place of first nations, the role of women, the balance between regionalism and national unity...the uniqueness of Quebec — all had roots in our colonial history". The companion volume begins appropriately with the night the Meech Lake Accord died.

In *Colonies* the pre-European period is seen through a wider lens with its knowledge expanded by recent scientific methods. The early sections of the same book put the colonies of Newfoundland, Acadia and the St. Lawrence into a colonial context rather than just one of primitive settlement. It is interesting to be reminded that the British-French wars for conquest were fought for a continent and not just for segments of it. These two texts are also handsomely illustrated. They are, however, heavy reading in the sense of *avoidsupois*, and this makes them appear more formidable than they are. Even with fascinating art work, they might be intimidating to beginning undergraduates and casual history buffs.

1 Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression, 1929-1939* (Toronto, 1990).

Each of the authors does full justice to an individual specialty and together they achieve some marvellously easy reading. Comparing the two sets again is to say that some parts seem almost identical yet the emphasis is different. Here and there one might offer a quibble or two, such as finding Prince Edward Island in its earlier incarnation as both "The Island of Saint John" and "Ile St. Jean". Another reservation might be noted in *Colonies*, where the position of women is properly discussed though the writers leave the impression that they expected society in colonial and early Confederation times to be as enlightened on the feminine rights issue as writers should be as the 21st century approaches.

In general, *Colonies* is more a coalescence of five writers than separate units and there is nothing to indicate which authors did which sections — unless the order in which they are listed is intended to indicate the order of appearance as contributors. The same applies to *Nation*. Because this latter volume carries more newspaper and magazine cartoons, more contemporary photographs of people and places than the other books in the group, it has the feel of a much more contemporary production. To a journalist and quondam political worker, the work is both nostalgic and reminiscent since so many of those public figures of the last half-century have been known or at least met in the flesh. The final chapter called "From Canadians to Québécois" is more than usually rewarding, a part of our recent history that needs to be much better known, even by the experts.

In *Nation*, the rise of Quebec nationalism, la révolution tranquille, the war between Ottawa and Quebec, the October Crisis and the first Quebec referendum are all effectively condensed and markedly informative. One mourns that Canadian history was not written that way much earlier this century. The familiarity of the subject matter and the personalities in *Nation* leave the feeling that "I was there".

Again, with respect to particular references, special thanks could be given *Colonies* for the detail and background of the development of the Atlantic Provinces. This is something other historians have not done in a general history. Especially notable is the light thrown on the genuine diversity of the colonial settlers, the rich cultural heritage in this mix, including blacks. How useful this kind of treatment can be is seen in a book by Rev. Leo Hynes released in the fall of 1992 on the Catholic Irish of New Brunswick. It does a more thorough job of putting the Irish story together than some others have done and suggests that this sort of attention to such seminal groups could have added another dimension to the books being considered here.² It should be noted that the *Colonies* chapter on regionalism is a welcome departure from customary treatment. Similarly new and valuable is the subject of distinctiveness between Acadian and Quebec French. There has been almost nothing previously done in English and precious little in French outside le Centre d'études acadiennes at l'Université de Moncton.

2 Leo J. Hynes, *The Catholic Irish in New Brunswick, 1783-1900* (Moncton, 1992)

Those of us who are fortunate enough to have travelled extensively in all areas of the country and penetrated its interior may be familiar with its immense variations, but most readers don't have such opportunities. The kind of history written in the sets of works dealt with in this essay strikes precisely the right chords essential to understanding what is Canada. Graham Fraser, the talented national affairs journalist, has made the comment that Canadians have been indeed studying 200 different versions of our history. And as one delegate to the recent constitutional conferences mentioned to this writer: "It was astonishing to watch the changes in attitudes of provincial leaders, federal participants and general delegates when they heard histories of other regions than their own. They were sometimes like children coming across the real world for the first time". One ventures to wish that all of the conferees, all the premiers, all of the federal cabinet and their advisors had been immersed in such accessible and comprehensive interpretations of the nation's whole history as these team-work histories offer. Had that been the case it would have been much easier to avoid endless haggling and confrontation and reach an appropriate Canadian consensus. Even those who would make history can benefit from reading it first.

J.E. BELLIVEAU