

# Atlantic Canada's Historical Writing Today: No Howe?

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## Atlantic Canada's Historical Writing Today: No Howe?

WHILE I HAVE BEEN WRITING this talk, the image of an unruly post-dinner audience assailing a guest speaker with volleys of buns — an oft-told legend associated with the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference — has caused me some disquiet. I offer as propitiation a story that Roy Atkinson, former president of the National Farmers' Union, told to a farm audience in Manitoba. It concerned an encounter at a national farm meeting in which an Alberta representative was waxing eloquent about the wonders of the vast West, and hinting that his conversation partner, a delegate from Prince Edward Island, couldn't really grasp the realities of the western situation and, by implication, "real farms". The Albertan claimed that his own estate was so big that he could get into his truck and drive to the farm's northern limit, then turn west and drive to that boundary, then south and finally east, and it would take him all day to cover the perimeter of his farm. As the Albertan paused to admire the effect of his words, the Islander nodded in agreement, and said, yes, he knew what the Albertan meant, because he had had a truck like that once.

My mother was a Scotch Canadian, and in my childhood home, there was often joking about being Scotch. A typical example was the claim that the traditional Scottish greeting for visitors was "you'll have had your tea then". Within this context, imagine a classroom moment: in a course on labour history at the University of Manitoba, my subject for one evening's lecture was Cape Breton in the 1920s. Since the volume of poems by Dawn Fraser had recently appeared, I read a few stanzas to set the tone and then made an offhand reference to the tradition of Robbie Burns. A student leaned back to another and whispered, "Who's Robbie Burns?" and — I swear this happened — the neighbour whispered back, just within my hearing: "The Scotch Taras Shevchenko". It was completely unexpected, not at all pre-packaged, a genuine North End Winnipeg cultural moment, and it illustrates the problem that we all face in trying to communicate across cultural divides. It also underlines my concern about flying buns and uninhibited revelers this evening: what can a student of distant lands — the Prairies — say to a group of scholars who specialize in the history and mores of this distinctive society?

My assignment, as conveyed by the conference organizers, is to comment on Atlantic Canada scholarship in recent decades. Region and cultural history figure large in my comments. As for Joseph Howe's appearance in the title, the question, "No Howe", is not meant to imply that you have ignored political history or responsible government. Nor should you infer that I think no one among you ranks with Howe, speaks like Howe or caroused as a youth like Howe. Rather, I imagined that it would be possible to take a cultural figure from the past — Howe in this case — and to think about him in relation to your *Acadiensis* generation. The reasons for this historical and biographical approach will unfold in the telling but two quotations set the stage.

First, there is Peter Waite's observation in the most recent newsletter of the Canadian Historical Association that "History is about people's lives, from which we make analysis and abstractions at our peril".<sup>1</sup> I take his warning to heart because I

<sup>1</sup> Peter Waite, "The five history books that have most influenced me . . .", *Canadian Historical Association Bulletin* 26, 1 (2000), p. 10.

have spent too long puzzling about abstractions and not long enough on individual stories. I like and endorse Professor Waite's view. The second is a line from the introduction to the forthcoming history of Atlantic Canada by Margaret Conrad and James Hiller: "Rooted in the land and shaped by the sea before the Industrial Revolution had its way with them, Atlantic Canadians developed a sense of place more reminiscent of time-bound European nations than the frontier-driven empires of North America".<sup>2</sup> This is a wonderful statement that rings true and yet is definitely analytical and abstract. Is it possible to reconcile my enthusiasm for it with an endorsement of Peter Waite's warning? In sum, my subjects are the *Acadiensis* generation and Joseph Howe. By considering their careers and the words they have left us, I hope to offer some thoughts about the balance that has to be struck between the study of peoples' lives, on one side, and the relevance — and place — of such abstractions as region.

A word about Joseph Howe. He was born in 1804, leader of his generation, winner of a libel trial in 1835, author of the famous four letters to Lord John Russell, victor in a pistol duel with John Haliburton, crucial figure in the achievement of responsible government, supporter of free and non-sectarian publicly-supported education, a notorious anti-Catholic briefly (to his regret in later years, it is sometimes said), lover of the natural world, advocate of imperial reorganization and of better intercolonial communication, critic of the Confederation arrangements, then negotiator of Nova Scotia's "Better Terms", intermediary in the first Riel resistance, first federal minister to conduct negotiations in the newly-established field of federal-provincial relations and finally, just before his death, Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia. Father of a child out of wedlock at the age of 20, he later married and had ten more children, five of whom survived to adulthood. He was not above off-colour remarks in his speeches and, as Murray Beck says, he could stoop to "outright vulgarity with less sophisticated audiences".<sup>3</sup> His great abilities — he was "a master of factual detail and its skillful presentation" — placed him above all his rivals, perhaps including George Brown and John A. Macdonald.<sup>4</sup>

What were the dominating motives in his life? Beck suggests that Howe himself would like to be remembered for puncturing the boredom that develops in a small society. But Beck, and others who have written about Howe, explain his strengths in a slightly different way, emphasizing first, his commitment to the British inheritance, second, his pride in Nova Scotia and third, his extraordinary energy.<sup>5</sup>

At this precise moment, perhaps, you may be struck with the thought that you now know where this discussion is going. Or, at least, you now see a glimmer where before

2 Margaret Conrad and James Hiller, "Atlantic Canada: A Region in the Making", p 10. I would like to thank the authors for permitting me to see the manuscript in advance of publication. The book is forthcoming in 2001 from Oxford University Press as *Atlantic Canada: A Region in the Making. The Oxford Illustrated History of Atlantic Canada*.

3 J. Murray Beck, *Joseph Howe, I: Conservative Reformer, 1804-1848* and *Joseph Howe, II: The Briton Becomes Canadian, 1848-1873* (Montreal and Kingston 1982, 1983), pp. 21-2, 65-6; P.A. Buckner "Canadian Biography and the Search for Joseph Howe", *Acadiensis*, XIV, 1 (Autumn 1984), pp. 105-16 and James A. Roy, *Joseph Howe: A Study in Achievement and Frustration* (Toronto, 1935).

4 J. Murray Beck, "Joseph Howe", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, X (Toronto, 1972), p. 364, cites Professor Keith Thomas.

5 Beck notes Howe's "irrepressible ebullience" in "Joseph Howe", p. 369.

you saw nothing. You suspect that I will praise you for your local loyalties, note the loss of the British dimension in today's Atlantic Canada, enthuse about your own energy and escape with a few closing banalities. And then I'll leave you, the true inheritors of Howe, to your party while I steal off to bed. But you should be warned that this is not my message, nor do I plan to quit so soon. The example of Howe's speeches alone, which ran for an hour or two on such occasions as this, sets the standard. And I should warn you that Howe occasionally spoke at even greater length, as in the famous 1843 meeting in Onslow, Nova Scotia, when he continued to debate — in bursts — for eight full hours, though admittedly he was having to alternate with a long-winded professor.<sup>6</sup>

Comparing Howe with the *Acadiensis* generation might seem an unlikely proposition. But consider one illustration, the case of Aboriginal history. Members of the *Acadiensis* group have revolutionized the picture of Aboriginal people in Atlantic Canada through the scholarship they have published in the last 30 years. Your contributions represent an extraordinary expansion of knowledge that is now being disseminated to a broader audience by means of books, newspaper articles and court judgments.

Howe's reading in this area would have been very limited by comparison and his writing even more so. But his customary energy and unconventional approach applied to his relations with Aboriginal people as they did to every aspect of his life. Beck records two instances when Howe encountered Aboriginal questions and, in each, he seems to have responded willingly and helpfully to ordinary requests that arose in the course of daily contacts. Thus, in the session of 1841, after a discussion with two "very intelligent" Aboriginal men, Howe worked for the creation of a post of Indian Commissioner to protect Aboriginal lands, to communicate government policy concerning Aboriginal people and to arrange schooling for Aboriginal children. He took the post himself. His main act was to travel to western parts of the province to investigate living conditions among First Nations. He concluded that they would benefit from appropriate capital investments, that they needed access to more fertile lands — which he attempted to arrange — but he was stumped by a schools issue. Aboriginal parents rejected schooling for their children in the English language and declared their wish to have their own language as the means of instruction.

Howe's demeanour suggests that he was as interested in the Aboriginal perspective as are contemporary scholars writing in *Acadiensis*. From the record, one cannot determine whether Howe was captive to the racist views that have, in the intervening century, so handicapped Canadians by limiting their responses to Aboriginal concerns. Perhaps one can imagine Howe responding positively to Bill Parenteau's wonderful study of salmon harvests in New Brunswick, for example, and dealing in measured terms with last year's Supreme Court ruling on resources.<sup>7</sup>

Another chapter of Atlantic history, that has long been a part of school lessons in

6 He was debating the Baptist Professor Edmund Crawley, who was firing "his pop-guns" at the Presbyterian view of colleges. See Beck, *Joseph Howe, I*, pp. 260-1.

7 Bill Parenteau, "'Care, Control and Supervision': Native People in the Canadian Atlantic Salmon Fishery, 1867-1900", *Canadian Historical Review*, 79, 1 (March 1998), pp. 1-35 and Regina v. Marshall (1999).

Canadian and imperial history, is the 200-year span stretching from the early 17th to the early 19th centuries. Howe knew a good deal concerning these matters. The battles, treaties and political boundary-staking that he read and spoke about still figure prominently in the new *Acadiensis* history, but what is striking today is the detailed knowledge that has accumulated in just the past 30 years.

Do the subjects of these historians differ from the subjects that Howe recognized? Yes and no. He had traveled to many of the communities and had talked and debated and joked with these people. He knew the contours of this world as well as today's scholars. An appreciation of Howe published a day after he died on 1 June 1873 picked him out as "the foremost figure in our history" and then added: "The news of his death will be known in the country towns and will spread to the scattered villages . . . The farmers driving along the country roads will stop to talk over his life and tell anecdotes of his conflicts. Those whose threshold he has crossed and by whose fireside he has made himself at home will recall his humour, his kindness, his sympathy, his many stories told as the night deepened and the logs in the chimney grew dim toward the hour of retiring".<sup>8</sup> Howe experienced the social range of this community at first hand, but did he depict its structure as effectively as do Bittermann, Mackinnon and Wynn — a few rich on top, a larger, more or less secure group in the middle and the largest proportion, the very poor, at the wide base of the triangle?<sup>9</sup> Probably not. For one thing, he would not have possessed today's range of conceptualizations about class. Rather, he would have been more familiar with the dualism of Jane Austen's "rough people and respectable people". For another, the audiences for his speeches would not have welcomed a clinical critique cloaked as social analysis. But Howe did know the range of experience around him. The travails so vividly described by Fingard in "The Winter's Tale" would not have surprised this observer of everyday life in Nova Scotia.<sup>10</sup>

Howe surely could talk to these people. His famous response to accusations in 1853 that he had gained personal and party advantage through a public facility, the telegraph, was that he would follow the course of the Aberdeen Scotchman of Musquodoboit who, when the blackflies got into his ears, eyes and mouth, just wrapped his breeks around his head and "let them have fair play at [his] duff . . . so [said Howe] I . . . have just turned my 'duff' to these gad flies".<sup>11</sup> In a head-to-head contest with the *Acadiensis* generation, Howe wins marks for style and knowledge, even though the theoretical qualities of his literary output may not have matched yours.

In the period stretching from the mid-19th century to the middle decades of the 20th century, the context of Atlantic history is Canadian and imperial, and increasingly literate and capitalist. And one theme in this story concerns local economic frustration. The loss of local control over the economic future, what David

8 D.C. Harvey "Joseph Howe and Local Patriotism", An Inaugural Lecture delivered on 10 March 1921 (University of Manitoba, Department of History, n.p.), p. 3.

9 Rusty Bittermann, Robert Mackinnon and Graeme Wynn, "Of Inequality and Interdependence in the Nova Scotian Countryside, 1850-70", *Canadian Historical Review* 74, 1 (March 1993), pp. 1- 43.

10 Judith Fingard "The Winter's Tale: The Seasonal Contours of Pre-industrial Poverty in British North America, 1815-1860", *Communications Historiques/Historical Papers* (1974), pp. 65-94.

11 Beck, *Joseph Howe*, II, p. 65.

Frank calls “the spatial consequences of capitalist development” and Ian McKay calls “dependent development”, placed issues “of regional disparity and economic democracy on the Canadian political agenda”.<sup>12</sup>

Again, it is interesting that the tenor of this work seems to parallel the criticism of Confederation levelled by Howe in 1865-66. His contention during the anti-Confederate campaign was that the higher Canadian tariff would handicap the Maritime colonies both in the export trade and in domestic consumption. Howe feared underdevelopment, and it came to pass. And the note he struck then was repeated in the 1880s, in the 1920s, in the speeches of Angus L. Macdonald in the 1930s, as well as in the writing of the entire generation of *Acadiensis* scholars. Given the time in which he worked, Howe anticipated your critique and should be given credit for doing so.

These remarks introduce just a few of the historical subjects that we think important today. Following Peter Waite’s injunction, I have wrapped a few comments about the *Acadiensis* generation historiography around a little biography of Joseph Howe. But to put much weight on such a comparison between Howe’s activities and yours would be at once ahistorical and unfair. The parallels are superficial, the differences profound. Your *Acadiensis* generation exhibits a harder, more analytical edge in its writings than was ever apparent in Howe’s speeches. You have collected a vast amount of data and have marshalled it in effective, carefully-constructed narratives that are quite unlike the stories Howe told local audiences. Your work reflects today’s much greater awareness of international forces and your more honest assessment — compared to the lavish praise offered by Howe — of local resources and local capacities. This is admirable because it sets such a high standard for public discourse in Atlantic Canada. And, to be blunt, it puts Howe’s speeches and writings in the shade. The 19th-century journalist-politician was less a critical thinker than a booster of local communities.

But Howe was not just a blowhard. His amazing energy and his sympathetic, down-to-earth observations won wide acceptance at the time. To understand his power, we have to return to abstractions and analysis — the very things Peter Waite cautioned about. And we must do so as historians in a post-modern age.

Region lies at the centre of this puzzle. Howe never had any doubts about such a concept. Given a quiz about public identities in the 1850s, Howe would have recognized the “local” as being his neighbourhood and city, the “regional” as Nova Scotia and the metropolitan or national/imperial context of these two public identities as Britain and the United States. An illustration of his world-view was this statement: “Placed between two mighty nations, we sometimes feel that we belong to neither”.<sup>13</sup> The “we” in this observation, of course, did not refer to Canada or the Maritimes but to Nova Scotia.

Howe’s view was typical of the perspective in the “textual” societies of pre-industrial northern North America. In these lands, a few citizens may have been

12 David Frank “The 1920s: Class and Region, Resistance and Accommodation”, pp. 234 and 271 and Ian McKay, “The 1910s: The Stillborn Triumph of Progressive Reform”, pp. 196-7 in E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto and Fredericton, 1993).

13 George Rawlyk, “The Maritimes and the Canadian Community”, in Mason Wade, ed., *Regionalism in the Canadian Community, 1867-1967* (Toronto, 1969), p. 107, citing R.A. MacLean, “Joseph Howe and British-American Union”, Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1966, p. 99.

literate and may have possessed access to the debates in the world's leading metropolises, but most people lived far outside the privileged circles that conducted such conversations. Elizabeth Goudie, writing her memoirs in the 1960s, had no difficulty in picking out the regional community to which she belonged: "I am very proud of my country, Labrador. That name goes very deep within my being, the beauty of its rivers and lakes and the beautiful green forests . . . . The name Labrador holds something hard to explain but I would like to explain it in my own way, and that is peace — a deep peace within that helps to make all its hard work easier to take".<sup>14</sup> In her world, the "local" was a label bestowed on the specific zone in which her family lived and hunted; the "regional" was Labrador; and the larger world, whether imperial or Canadian, constituted a distinct third level of experience, related to the other two in a single social and political "system" that encompassed many local and several (at least) regional entities.

The Howe and Goudie perception of what was meant by local, regional and national fits with the Conrad and Hiller suggestion that there are many regions in the Atlantic community's past. It matches exactly their suggestion that Labrador should be seen as a separate region for much of the history of these territories, and with the notion that as many as eight or nine regions figured prominently in the pre-Confederation centuries. This approach also implies that region becomes an intellectual puzzle only after Confederation, and after the social sciences and literate analysis complicated Canadian understandings of place.<sup>15</sup>

Region hasn't had an easy time in Atlantic Canadian scholarship. The writings of D.C. Harvey in the 1930s used references to a formal region — to the character-shaping qualities of the Atlantic Ocean, for example — but these are given little credence today.<sup>16</sup> And the subsequent social science work on functional regions (economic, political, urban and the rest) has declined in influence in the 1990s, chiefly because it is based on circular reasoning that defines regions as intellectual models or constructs only, not as real aspects of real people's experience.

When one turns to the *Acadiensis* generation, the discussion of region is strangely muted, just as it is in the parallel discussions of the Prairies. In the synthesis edited by Reid and Buckner, entitled *The Atlantic Region to Confederation: A History*, nowhere — neither in the index nor in the text — is the concept of region discussed. The territory remains an assumed whole, but the volume offers no analysis of whether it is a physical or functional or imagined regional entity.<sup>17</sup> In the post-Confederation volume edited by Muise and Forbes, region arises at least a dozen times in the guise of regional protest against national policies and, on a few occasions, as an identity that is either weak or absent. Yet the entire story, in this as in the other volume, is predicated on the assumption that there is a logic to discussing this part of the world on its own. But what is the logic?<sup>18</sup>

14 Elizabeth Goudie, *Woman of Labrador*, 2nd ed. (Halifax, 1996 [1973]), p. 196.

15 Conrad and Hiller distinguish as many as eight or nine regions, including the four — or five — that became provinces (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador), plus the Aboriginal, Acadian, Cape Breton and African Canadian communities.

16 D.C. Harvey, "The Heritage of the Maritimes", *Dalhousie Review*, XIV (April 1934), pp. 28-32.

17 Phillip A. Buckner and John G. Reid, eds., *The Atlantic Region to Confederation: A History* (Toronto and Fredericton, 1994).

18 The index to Forbes and Muise, ed., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* contains entries for regional identity, regional protest and regionalism — but not region.

Conrad and Hiller, in their forthcoming history of Atlantic Canada, do dedicate some fascinating pages to the question. Because they see strong evidence of a region taking shape *today*, they justify the boundaries of their volume by outlining historical forces that eventually created a single community: a shared location, common resources, a common pattern of immigration, the great battles between Europe's two leading empires, the impact of Confederation and Canadian policy choices and a *recent* convergence — since the 1950s, not as in the Prairie case since 1900 — of popular perceptions of formal, functional and imagined regions. In other words, Conrad and Hiller articulate what is assumed but silent in the other two volumes: the Atlantic Region is a phenomenon of the present built on forces inherited from the past — “a region in the making”.<sup>19</sup>

But let us pause for a moment and step back from this line of thought. In my enthusiasm for the abstraction of “region”, I have wandered away from people again. Ignoring Peter Waite's warning, I have been speaking excitedly about theory and concept. The subjects are intrinsically interesting. They draw us deeper into the story of these Atlantic communities and into the story of the *Acadiensis* generation. Is it not possible that our simultaneous pursuit of the personal and the abstract, though paradoxical, can be reconciled?

In the illuminating generalization with which we began, Conrad and Hiller suggested that region is relevant to an understanding of this part of the world because the sense of place among Atlantic Canadians is very strong — indeed, stronger than among other North Americans. Their suggestion accords with daily observation. Consider Del Mui's attachment to his plot in Belle Côte, Suzanne Morton's commitment to Beach Meadows, Ernie Forbes's determination to bag a moose in some secluded New Brunswick bush, and David Frank's long love affair with J.B. McLachlan and industrial Cape Breton. These are unusually strong local attachments, one might conclude, given the relative restlessness of many members of the global academic class. Such loyalties constitute a little evidence, admittedly anecdotal, that sustains the Conrad and Hiller view, and it might be multiplied many-fold by a proper survey of members of the *Acadiensis* generation.

Next, consider the actual texts prepared by members of this group. A century of economic frustration has taken its toll on the scholars of Atlantic Canada, leading to a tone of disillusionment, even sadness, in their academic work.<sup>20</sup> Conrad and Hiller describe the Maritimes as “economically poor and politically impotent”. Forbes and Mui say the community was excluded from the “full benefits” of Confederation though it sought only “sustained economic development and equal opportunity”.<sup>21</sup> Some of your colleagues in political science, economics and sociology communicated a similar sensation of loss and anxiety at an Atlantic-Western constitutional conference in 1991, just as the post-Meech Lake crisis raised the prospect of a sovereign Quebec. I left that meeting shocked by the despair they conveyed. Denis

19 Conrad and Hiller, “Atlantic Canada”.

20 Ian McKay, “Notes on ‘Region’ and ‘Development’ in the Writing of the History of Atlantic Canada”, paper presented to the Atlantic Canada Workshop, Halifax, August 1997. See “A Note on ‘Region’ in Writing the History of Atlantic Canada”, *Acadiensis*, XXIX, 2 (Spring 2000), pp. 81-101.

21 Conrad and Hiller, “Atlantic Canada”; Forbes and Mui, eds., *Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, p. x.

Stairs's moving call for an aggressive, planned response to the next Quebec referendum put a sharp point on such thinking. These reflections on the Maritimes' relation with Canada are not new: John Reid summed up the reactions of an earlier generation of historians, including A.G. Bailey and W.S. MacNutt, by saying that they had been "disappointed at the betrayal of what Canada should and could be".<sup>22</sup> All of this evidence attests to a widespread sense of distinct Maritime or Atlantic economic and political interests. It also reinforces one's awareness of a broadly-conceived Maritime or Atlantic Canadian regional consciousness. Such fragments illustrate, simply, that a notion of region is helpful to observers of this community. And yet it need hardly be added that this is another abstract analysis, the utility of which was questioned by Peter Waite.

It may be helpful to recall at this point that Waite was not opposing all analysis or every abstraction in the writing of history. Rather, he was pointing out that every departure from the lives of people was taken at one's peril. His warning serves as a useful reminder that our stories should be rooted first in individuals and groups, not in theories and concepts. Joseph Howe's story will make the distinction clearer.

Students of Howe have concluded that he was a wonderful orator. But what did he say? According to D.C. Harvey, Howe employed a discernible strategy in his speeches: "Like Napoleon, Howe early grasped the idea that the strength of a people lies in its history; and no one knew better than he the privations and achievements of the exiles who left New England to build up Nova Scotia . . . . In addressing a local audience, no matter how remote from the capital, he always began with some reference to its history and traditions and tried to elevate the most commonplace theme to a lofty plane. To him the greatest wealth of any country was not its material resources, but the blood and the sacrifice of its citizens who had preserved their heritage".<sup>23</sup> In sum, Howe used the history of local people and places to capture the attention of his listeners.

In undertaking to weave a broader message around such stories, Howe had to resort to just as many abstractions as any modern social scientist. Consider his emphasis on "Britishness", a term that might have conveyed volumes to his listeners in the 19th century but is certainly an abstraction. Or analyze this passage from his talk to the Mechanics' Institute of Halifax in 1834:

The all-wise Being, who divided the earth into continents, peninsulas and islands — who separated tribes from each other . . . different feature[s] . . . different tongue[s] — evidently intended that there should be a local knowledge and a local love, binding his creatures to particular spots of earth, and interesting them peculiarly for the prosperity, improvement and happiness of these places. The love of country, therefore, though distinguished from . . . universal love, boasts an origin as divine and serves purposes scarcely less admirable. It begets a generous rivalry among the

22 James N. McCrorie and Martha L. MacDonald, eds., *The Constitutional Future of the Prairie and Atlantic Regions of Canada* (Regina, 1992); Denis Stairs, *Canada and Québec after Québecois Secession: 'Realist' Reflections on an International Relationship* (Halifax, 1996); interview with John Reid, November 1999.

23 Harvey, "Joseph Howe and Local Patriotism", p. 21.

nations of the earth, by which the intellectual and physical resources of each are developed and strengthened . . . You who owe your origin to other lands cannot resist the conviction that as you loved them so will your children love this.<sup>24</sup>

Again, Howe's reliance on an abstract explanation — God's inculcation of a special capacity for local pride in every citizen — seems less than helpful to today's students. Yet one can imagine that it moved his audience in colonial Halifax.

Every generation has oriented itself by means of stories about the past in which are embedded particularly powerful abstractions and modes of analysis. For Howe, Britishness and God's inculcation of local pride did the trick. But he made such excursions into the abstract at his peril. Today's students would find such discussion merely quaint, if not utterly meaningless. They would ask for "sharper" or "more relevant" or "harder" analysis.

These same students would undoubtedly find the *Acadiensis* writings of the past three decades more to their liking. Yet, like Howe, the *Acadiensis* generation has relied on the history of local people and local communities to establish a sense of meaning in their society. Of course, your analytical constructs bear little resemblance to those of Howe. You wrote your works within the lines established by such concepts as class and gender and nation, but you have also referred to the distinctiveness of Atlantic Canada's economic circumstance and cultural perspective. In short, you adopted region as a crucial category in your thought.<sup>25</sup>

In our anti-historical age, we suffer from a loss of confidence in place and history. But your work — the work of the *Acadiensis* generation — provides a courageous response to this condition. Like Joseph Howe, you have ensured that place and history are conceived as one. You have recognized that, to understand a community, one must understand people's lives and the abstractions by which they explain their positions. You have clothed the moving stories of real people in the abstractions that carry meaning in today's society. It is a pleasure to be able to salute the tangible monument to memory that you have created. This monument attests to the living power of Joseph Howe and all the others who have lived in the northern North American communities along the Atlantic coast for many centuries. The monument is built only out of paper and ink, but it will survive, and you can take pride in signing it as the craftswomen and craftsmen of the *Acadiensis* generation.

GERALD FRIESEN

24 Joseph Howe, "Inaugural Address before the Halifax Mechanics Institute" in Joseph Chisholm, ed., *The Speeches and Published Letters of Joseph Howe* (Halifax, 1909), pp. 8-9.

25 Ian McKay has referred to "a certain vertigo of placelessness" in some recent Canadian historical writing. See "A Note on 'Region'", p. 92. I wonder whether this generalization applies to the writers of regional works who, by definition, make assumptions if not explicit decisions about place and the distinctiveness of place-defined communities in shaping their research projects. The more common approach in Atlantic Canada thought, perhaps, is represented by John Reid's observation that "the only way to understand [Canada] fully is to start from an accurate awareness of regional variation" and that "the question is not so much why a regional approach is needed, but rather what other approach could possibly be valid". See John G. Reid "Writing About Regions", in John Schultz, ed., *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History* (Scarborough, 1990), pp. 81 and 79.