

Commentary:
The Quest of the Folk

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Commentary: *The Quest of the Folk*

IN 1978 THE LATE HENRY SHAPIRO PUBLISHED *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in American Consciousness, 1870-1920*, which examined how – in the post-Civil War years – missionaries, educators, journalists and fiction writers constructed an image of Appalachia as a homogenous region – untouched by industrialization and home to isolated, backward mountain folk.¹ Shapiro is just one of many authors from the 1970s onward to examine how intellectuals, folklorists, entrepreneurs and others have projected romanticized versions of ethnic or regional history and culture, usually with the aim of finding the authentic “Folk”, the representatives of a simpler past. During the folk revival of the 1930s, Appalachia was both essentialized and commodified as authentic Americana.

Atlantic Canadians have long been conscious of the double-edged sword of regional stereotypes. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the view from central Canada was that the Maritimes and Newfoundland, however “friendly” or “laid back” their people, were backward, conservative, rural societies – dependent on declining resource industries and under the control of parochial politicians and powerful business families. The “authentic” East Coasters of regional stereotype were a problem when they reached the streets of Toronto, as municipal politicians, social agencies, journalists and the critically acclaimed film *Goin’ Down the Road* all suggested.²

The pioneer of new cultural history for the Maritimes is Ian McKay, who has published on the “invention” of Peggy’s Cove, a classic Nova Scotia tourist shrine (1988), the advent of “tartanism” or “Scottishness” in mid-20th-century Nova Scotia tourism promotion (1992) and the politics of commemoration and tourism (1993).³ His influential *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston, 1994) examines the question of regional stereotypes from a fresh perspective – that of indigenous “cultural producers” folklorist Helen Creighton (1899-1989) and handicrafts promoter Mary Black (1895-1988). These were not outsiders, but native daughters; Creighton, a tireless booster, was an outright Nova Scotia patriot. Creighton, who collected more than 4,000 “traditional” songs as well as stories – many of them for the Library of Congress and the National Museum of Canada – was particularly influential in folklore studies, tourism and popular consciousness at both the regional and national level. According to McKay, whose research was influenced by his understanding of theorists such as Marx, Foucault, Gramsci, Benedict Anderson, Stuart Hall and others,

1 Harry Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill, 1978).

2 Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, *Social Opportunity Project: Report of a Survey Relating to Urban Migrants and Receiving Areas in Metropolitan Toronto* (Toronto 1968); *Goin’ Down the Road* (Toronto, 1970), directed by Don Shebib.

3 Ian McKay, “Among the Fisherfolk: J.F.B. Livesay and the Invention of Peggy’s Cove”, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 23, 1 & 2 (Spring 1988), pp. 23-45; Ian McKay, “Tartanism Triumphant: The Construction of Scottishness in Nova Scotia, 1933-1954”, *Acadiensis*, XXI, 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 5-47; Ian McKay, “History and the Tourist Gaze: The Politics of Commemoration in Nova Scotia, 1935-1964”, *XXII*, 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 102-38.

Creighton and Black were “antimodern modernizers” who promoted highly selective images of the “Folk” of Nova Scotia for conservative ends. The result of McKay’s labours, according to one sympathetic reviewer in 1996, was “one of the most important books to be published in Canadian history in years”.⁴

Personally I always enjoy returning to this book despite its weaknesses. One of these is the lack of a firm editor; the chapter on Creighton, for example, runs to 108 pages with more than 350 endnotes. Such detail reflects something of a “deny the territory to the enemy” approach that leaves no juicy quotation from Creighton’s papers untouched.⁵ Other reviewers have raised the issue of the actual impact of the cultural manipulation practiced by Creighton, Black and writers such as Thomas Raddall, Frank Parker Day and Ernest Buckler as well as photographer Wallace MacAskill.⁶ True, Creighton was not as progressive a folklorist as contemporary American collectors or her Canadian colleague Edith Fowke. But Nova Scotia would have been a conservative society, whose political and economic leaders ignored or downplayed class and ethnic tensions, with or without Helen Creighton. A related question is the degree to which cultural producers were responding to consumers pre-existing attitudes and tastes. Raddall, for example, did not write short stories or historical novels for the edification of late-20th-century social historians but to pay the bills. Ultimately, the answer to these questions cannot be easily quantified.

Where I take issue with *The Quest of the Folk* is its selectivity and applicability for the rest of the region. Nova Scotia, like other provinces, had a countervailing discourse of modernity as expressed through the media, business, politics, the arts and popular culture. Municipal and provincial politicians, industrialists, real estate interests, boards of trade, chambers of commerce and other “boosters” did not portray Nova Scotia or the region as an antimodern backwater. The pages of *The Busy East*, published initially in Saint John and then for many years in Sackville, New Brunswick, suggest a region grasping for economic and technological modernity. Although the publication’s successor, *Atlantic Advocate*, published in the 1950s and 1960s local colour stories, regional history, folktales and other items that support McKay’s general thesis, it also advocated the full modernization of Maritime society. The growing tourism industry, despite its reliance on romanticized local and regional history and idealized depictions of regional landscapes and seascapes, was also a force for modernization.⁷ In 1960s Saint John, the “Loyalist man” image was developed to promote the city as a retail destination, not a bastion of 18th-century pro-monarchy conservatism. The main boosters of the once-popular Loyalist Days festival were not conservative cultural producers but the board of trade.⁸

4 Marlene Shore, Review of *The Quest of the Folk, Labour/le Travail*, 37 (Spring 1996), p. 308.

5 The book may have been even longer if the author had been able to quote from closed files in the Helen Creighton papers at the Nova Scotia Archives and Record Management.

6 Margaret Conrad, Review of *The Quest of the Folk*, *American Historical Review*, 101, 2 (April 1996), p. 597; Archie Green, Review of *The Quest of the Folk*, *Canadian Historical Review*, 77, 1 (March 1996), pp. 122-5.

7 Greg Marquis, “‘A Reluctant Concession to Modernity’: Alcohol and Modernization in the Maritimes, 1945-80”, *Acadiensis*, XXXII, 2 (Spring 2003), pp. 31-59. *The Atlantic Advocate* published short stories by Will R. Bird, identified by McKay as a major purveyor of the imagined Folk tradition.

8 Greg Marquis, “Commemorating the Loyalists in the Loyalist City: Saint John, 1882-1934”, *Urban History Review*, XXXIII, 1 (Fall 2004), pp. 24-33.

Early-20th-century social activists of the same generation as Creighton and Black often wished that the region was less modern. Social reformers, for example, fretted that modernity, in the form of alcohol, cigarettes, motion pictures, automobiles, jazz music, immodest fashions and other evils, were endangering morality, youth or the family. Religious leaders pointed to declining church membership and attendance. Others worried that economic opportunity elsewhere combined with improved communications and transportation was producing harmful outmigration. In 1932, for instance, Dr. George Trueman, the president of Mount Allison University, warned that the continued exodus of the best and brightest from the region would leave behind a lumpenproletariat of low intelligence, little ambition and weak morals. Worse still, this problematic population had a high birthrate. Trueman lamented that “none of the feeble-minded have gone”.⁹

McKay’s thesis may be applicable to the study of the cultural depiction of Acadians by both Acadian and non-Acadian folklorists, historians and writers. The “invention of tradition” framework seems particularly germane for pre-1970s Acadian historiography and folklore studies.¹⁰ And the McKay lens should be focused on New Brunswick’s Louise Manny, a contemporary of Creighton and Black who, in 1959, after a dozen years of collecting New Brunswick folk songs and playing recorded ballads on local radio, organized the first Miramichi Folksong Festival.¹¹ The festival soon became known for its old-fashioned “authenticity”; in the words of American folklorist Sandy Ives, there were no “young urbanites with their guitars and dulcimers”.¹² Other obvious topics for the new-cultural-history approach are Prince Edward Island’s “Island way of life” and the romanticized labourist interpretation of Cape Breton history.

My recent research on public history in early-20th-century New Brunswick clashes with the findings of *The Quest of the Folk*. The largely Saint John-based historians and heritage activists who developed the historiography, institutions and audience for public history – James Hannay, David R. Jack and Reverend W.O. Raymond – together with New Brunswickers W.F. Ganong and John Clarence Webster, did not construct Folk visions of the provincial past (at least not for anglophone New Brunswick). Although individuals in this movement indulged in romanticism (in Webster’s case it was in order to attract a wider audience and increased public support for preserving historic sites), and some harboured socially and politically conservative attitudes (Raymond’s annual Loyalist Day sermon invariably denounced contemporary American society for encouraging mass divorce), they did not construct Folk images of anglophone New Brunswickers. The activities of the New Brunswick Historical Society, the Natural History Society and individual authors who reached audiences through local newspapers and other periodicals – such as the *Collections of the New Brunswick Historical Society*, *New Brunswick Magazine* and *Acadiensis* –

9 “Feeble-Minded Percentage Grows in NB”, *Evening Times Globe*, 17 October 1932, pp. 9, 12.

10 See David Frank, “The 1920s: Class and Region: Resistance and Accommodation”, in E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muike, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto and Fredericton, 1993), p. 268.

11 Louise Manny and James Wilson, *Songs of the Miramichi* (Fredericton, 1968). Creighton produced one major compilation of New Brunswick folksongs: *Folksongs From Southern New Brunswick* (Ottawa, 1971).

12 Sandy Ives, *Folksongs of New Brunswick* (Fredericton, 1989), p. 11.

fit within the overall framework of Whig history. New Brunswick and regional history, like that of Canada, were exercises in political, economic and social progress. The 1904 Champlain-de Monts tercentenary celebrations in Saint John, dominated by anglophones, commemorated not the establishment of the Acadian people, but the discovery of the Saint John River and the beginnings of the future Dominion of Canada. English New Brunswickers regarded the Loyalists as pioneer settlers and “founding fathers”, but not as essentialized Folk.¹³

Webster, a former professor of medicine, and Ganong, a botany professor, both of whom had worked in the United States, were important forces behind the development of the modernist New Brunswick Museum, complete with an art collection and archives, that opened in Saint John in 1934.¹⁴ Webster believed that modernization in the form of popular culture and materialism was making the region a wasteland of high culture, including an appreciation for history and art.¹⁵ The historical renaissance represented by these individuals was not confined to the post-1783 anglophone past: Webster was involved with the establishment of the Fort Beauséjour Museum in the mid-1930s and, as a representative of the national Historic Sites and Monuments Board, he helped commemorate sites and individuals from the pre-1763 Acadian past. In 1928 he produced *An Historical Guide to New Brunswick*, a tourist guide which detailed people, places and events from the “Indian, French and English” periods of provincial history.¹⁶ The point of these examples is that not all cultural producers highlighted “the Folk” or privileged antimodernity and “Innocence” over other themes. Cultural representation in the Maritimes, as in other regions, was diverse, shifting and perspectival. It will be up to the next generation of cultural historians, inspired by *The Quest of the Folk*, to reveal that complexity.

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- 13 Greg Marquis, “Celebrating Champlain in the Loyalist City: Saint John, 1904-10”, *Acadiensis*, XXXIII, 2 (Spring 2004), pp. 27-43 and Marquis, “Commemorating the Loyalists”.
- 14 Gerald Thomas, “John Clarence Webster: Applying Material History: Developing the New Brunswick Museum”, in Peter Rider, ed., *Studies in History and Museums* (Ottawa, 1994), pp. 33-51. For the modernist museum, see Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago, 1998) and Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory and Politics* (New York, 1995).
- 15 John Clarence Webster, *The Distressed Maritimes: A Study of Educational and Cultural Conditions in Canada* (Toronto, 1926). Michael Levenson, in “Modernism”, *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, 4 (New York, 2005), pp. 1465-6, defines modernization as the condition of social, economic and technological changes that distinguished the 19th from the 20th century. The “lived experience” of these transformations was modernity.
- 16 *Evening Times Globe*, 10 September 1932; John Clarence Webster, “Notes and Documents: The Historical Renaissance in the Maritime Provinces and in British Columbia”, *Canadian Historical Review*, 17 (1936), pp. 413-15; John Clarence Webster, *An Historical Guide to New Brunswick* (Fredericton, 1928); John Clarence Webster, *Those Crowded Years: 1863-1944. An Octogenarian's Record of Work* (Shediac, 1944).