Acadiensis
Journal of the History of the Atlantic Region
Revue d'histoire de la région Atlantique

ACADIENSIS

A Coffee with John Reid

Courtney Mrazek and John G. Reid

Volume 50, Number 2, Fall 2021

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091264ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)
1712-7432 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this document

Mrazek, C. & Reid, J. (2021). A Coffee with John Reid. *Acadiensis*, *50*(2), 145–154.

A Coffee with John Reid

The following conversation took place on 24 September 2020 at a café in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Mrazek: Hello, John. Thank you for taking the time to do this interview with me. Alright, my first two questions are: how did you first get involved in *Acadiensis* and how long were you its editor?

Reid: Well, I suppose you could say that I first got involved when I published an article in *Acadiensis* in 1977.[1] It was on the 17th-century colony of New Scotland, drawn from my doctoral work at that time. I was, of course, very much aware of *Acadiensis* when I was a full-time doctoral student at UNB [University of New Brunswick] from 1972 to 1975. As you know, the journal began in 1971 when Phil Buckner was the editor (and would be for many years after that), and so I certainly knew that *Acadiensis* was establishing itself very quickly in those years as a really top-rate journal by any standards. And for any new journal it does take some time to become established, but *Acadiensis* I think became established very quickly and a lot of it had to do with Phil. Also, the authors. There have been a lot of them down the years, but Bill Acheson's article – his famous article – Ernie Forbes, and, of course, Judith Fingard.[2] So, I was very much aware of that taking place. But in a certain sense, during those years when I was a doctoral student, I was always kind of on a parallel track, because I went there essentially as a US colonialist, even though I didn't come out of there as a US colonialist. For example I didn't take Stewart MacNutt's seminar – I was not really in a full sense an Atlantic Canada historian at that time – so I was less directly impacted, if you will.

I published that first *Acadiensis* article in 1977, then when I got involved in writing the history of Mount Allison I published a couple of articles in

1 John G. Reid, "The Scots Crown and the Restitution of Port Royal, 1629-1632," *Acadiensis* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 39-63.

2 T.W. Acheson, "The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880-1910," *Acadiensis* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1972): 3-28; E.R. Forbes, "Prohibition and the Social Gospel in Nova Scotia," *Acadiensis* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1971): 11-36; and Judith Fingard, "The New England Company and the New Brunswick Indians, 1786-1826: A Comment on the Colonial Perversion of British Benevolence," *Acadiensis* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1972): 29-42.

Courtney Mrazek, "A Coffee with John Reid," *Acadiensis* 50, no. 2 (Autumn/automne 2021): 145-154.

that area and I suppose that was when I really became more of a specifically Atlantic Canada historian.[3] And so that was when I really became more involved, and in 1992 I joined the editorial advisory board. I became co-editor in 2010, which was the first time there ever were co-editors, and from outside of UNB, rather than a single editor. And I stayed in that role for six years until the end of December 2015, with Janet Guildford for the first three years, then Sasha Mullally for two years, and then Andrew Nurse for the final year. And I also joined the editorial board, of course, as co-editor. I stayed on the editorial board until the end of 2020 and then rejoined the editorial advisory board. So that is the brief story of my involvement.

Mrazek: Yes, the history of *Acadiensis* vis-à-vis John Reid. So, this piece is for the 50th anniversary of *Acadiensis*. I looked through past issues for big milestones, especially the issue published in 2000, and the questions then seemed to be: "What is Atlantic Canadian history?" "Can we actually 'do' Atlantic Canadian history?" "What is the role of region within history?" And, "Is it a helpful lens?" Reflecting on what the field is like now, I think some of the central questions are "Where is the Atlantic Canadian field going in terms of subfields?" [and] "Is it still helpful to devote research to geographical and regional frameworks?" I wanted to pick your brain on those questions.

Reid: Well, those are some of the very central questions that, in a way, the journal has always been about. And I think the place I would start is that *Acadiensis* has always treated the history of Atlantic Canada in a widely defined sense. Obviously, in terms of *Acadiensis*, Atlantic Canada includes the four Atlantic provinces, and the geographical extent of them before they were Atlantic provinces. But it also includes Maine, and also includes the Gaspé. Furthermore, it has always, as far as I can remember, been open to studies that are comparative studies, where Atlantic Canada or part of Atlantic Canada is compared with somewhere else and has always been open to thematic studies that had substantial Atlantic Canada content but are not necessarily confined narrowly to Atlantic Canada. So that, to me, has always been important. I think *Acadiensis*, in terms of editorial work and so on, has always recognized that there are many approaches to Atlantic Canada, and there are many variations

3 John G. Reid, "Mount Allison College: The Reluctant University," *Acadiensis* 10, no. 1 (Autumn 1980): 35-66; John G. Reid, "The Education of Women at Mount Allison, 1854-1914," *Acadiensis* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 3-33.

within Atlantic Canada. One of the obvious ones is, can you just lump together Newfoundland and Labrador with the Maritimes? And the answer is, of course, in any kind of crude sense, no you can't. They are very different. And yet, for some purposes there are certain very real affinities – geographical affinities – but also thematic affinities in areas like resource exploitation, and many other areas. So there has always been a great deal of leeway for potential authors, and *Acadiensis* is not the kind of journal where an author would submit something and have the editor come back and say "No, no, no, no, this is not what we do." The editorship has never been territorial, in a sense, about Atlantic Canada. The idea has been to represent the best and most leading edge of scholarship that, of course, has a substantial element of Atlantic Canada history in any form – but to be open and accommodating in terms of that. Clearly, too, within the confines of Atlantic Canada, there are areas in history that do not depend on simplistic geographical or political definitions. Indigenous history, particularly, is not defined by Atlantic Canada or by any non-Indigenous kind of geographical boundaries. But again, *Acadiensis* has always been of the view that Atlantic Canada is never a restrictively political form of defining things and therefore that Indigenous history, or also Acadian history, has a full place within the journal. So to me, that's the key – that Atlantic Canada is a way of conceptualizing the journal, in a broad range of terms, but it's not something to be interpreted restrictively.

And I think, also, that is an important part of how to address the question of what is the role of region? To me, one of the best statements of that was Bill Godfrey's article in the *Queen's Quarterly* in 1984 in which he addressed what George Rawlyk had put forward about a new golden age of Maritime or Atlantic historiography.[4] Bill was very skeptical of the idea of a golden age, but – and I can't remember the exact words now – essentially what he was arguing was that Atlantic Canada, or whatever part of Atlantic Canada, should be a lens through which historians can effectively address important themes of all kinds. Of course, the purpose is to allow us to understand the past of Atlantic Canada as such, but there are many, many themes that when you look at the evidence about Atlantic Canada and you look at the interpretive scope that Atlantic Canada affords, you can apply that extremely widely. If you take an example which interests me particularly, the role of the Peace and Friendship treaties has always struck me as having some real historical affinities with the Treaty of

4 William G. Godfrey, "'A New Golden Age': Recent Historical Writing on the Maritimes," *Queen's Quarterly* 91 (Summer 1984): 350–82.

Waitangi in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In that sense, serious study of the treaties, which are again not confined by the geography of Atlantic Canada but do come within the *Acadiensis* definition, can be extremely helpful in understanding the history of New Zealand. I think there should be that openness to breadth of theme – that's what "region" in a sense is all about. It's a way of studying things in a concentrated way but which gives insights that are more universal in nature. I think that's how I would address that.

Mrazek: That's a very good answer. No one has ever asked you about region before, right?

Reid: It is interesting when you're involved with a journal like *Acadiensis*, or with any journal, especially if you're a co-editor; you need to do some serious thinking and soul-searching about what is the role of the journal? With a journal like *Acadiensis*, clearly questions regarding this idea of region become quite central to what you keep coming back to time and time again.

Mrazek: While I was thinking about the direction Atlantic Canadian history might be moving towards, three subfields repeatedly came to mind. Indigenous history, environmental history, and medical history. For Indigenous history, I think a greater emphasis on the importance of nation-based histories will abound, very much in line with the recent piece Mercedes Peters published in *Acadiensis* – so really finalizing the move away from approaches that paint a homogenous historical picture of Indigenous peoples in North America, and towards more specific (and regional) nation histories.[5] As for environmental and medical history, I think both fields will develop a new, or renewed, line of questioning. In *Acadiensis*, [Peter] Twohig has published a lot on the history of medicine, as others have as well, but, in my mind, it has not been one of the dominant approaches to Atlantic Canadian history.[6] Right now, mostly informed by the COVID-19 pandemic, there seems to be a greater interest in

5 Mercedes Peters, "The Future is Mi'kmaq: Exploring the Merits of Nation-Based Histories as the Future of Indigenous History in Canada," *Acadiensis* 48, no. 2 (Autumn 2019): 206-16.

6 Peter L. Twohig, "'Local Girls' and 'Lab Boys': Gender, Skill and Medical Laboratories in Nova Scotia in the 1920s and 1930s," *Acadiensis* 31, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 55-75; Twohig, "Aboriginal Health in Canada," *Acadiensis* 32, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 140-8; Twohig, "The 'Celebrated Indian Herb Doctor': Francis Tumblety in Saint John, 1860," *Acadiensis* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 70-88; Twohig, "'Are They Getting Out of Control?' The Renegotiation of Nursing Practice in the Maritimes, 1950-1970," *Acadiensis* 44, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 91-111.

medical history, and in environmental history. Do you agree with these three subfields? Are there any others you think are burgeoning right now?

Reid: That's a good question. Not to be exclusive about it, because there are many potentially exciting areas of enquiry, but yes, I would agree with those three. And Acadian history, probably in the same way. There are many emerging Acadian historians, and I have an involvement in a project that's being headed up by Greg Kennedy and Clint Bruce that looks at re-envisioning Acadie – not purely historical, but there's a lot of historical content in it and Acadian history is a very dynamic field in terms of the key participants. The relationship of *Acadiensis* with Acadian history is one obviously in which for Acadian scholars there are other publication venues, so there was a time when *Acadiensis* was seen really as not much of an Acadian history journal. There was some of that discussion, as you know, at the Atlantic Canada Studies conference in 2000 that was written up in the special issue of the journal at that time, and since then there has been a real effort at *Acadiensis* to maintain a reasonable flow of publications in the French language. I think I would certainly say that Acadian history belongs with the others as a burgeoning field. To what degree *Acadiensis* can keep itself in the front line of that, well, that remains to be seen.

In terms of the other three that you mentioned, I think these are major fields. They're fields, I think, that do again present certain challenges to a journal like *Acadiensis* in the sense that *Acadiensis* really began as a leading-edge journal of the 1970s, so obviously a print journal, and one in which the gold standard was the research article with review essays. *Acadiensis* has rarely, as you know, done reviews of specific single works, and it never had a long review section as many journals do – it always tended to have the review essays. So that was innovative at the time, to concentrate on that. But as time has gone on, obviously one major change has been electronic publication. *Acadiensis* now has the *Acadiensis* blog. But also, there has been a kind of proliferation of journals so that, for people for whom, 30 or 40 years ago, *Acadiensis* would have been the obvious journal to publish in, there are now a lot more options and not all of them are either review essays or research articles. So *Acadiensis* I think, has rightly – some of this was started while I was co-editor, but there's been more in the years since then – started to put more emphasis on historiographical analyses that are more geared to identifying changes, historiographical approaches, and capturing them when they're still very fresh –

that kind of writing. And so I think *Acadiensis* is well-placed to continue to do that kind of thing.

Those three fields that you mentioned are very vibrant fields in those kinds of ways. So, I think *Acadiensis* has a great opportunity to stay ahead of the curve. It does take a persistently forward-looking and creative kind of thinking – which the current editors and the others in recent years have been really successful in sustaining, and in keeping the ideas flowing. There's always been, and I'm not saying anything original here, what E.H. Carr called the dialogue between the past and the present.[7] And at one edge of that spectrum, it's obviously crucially important to retain the discipline's integrity and use of evidence, and a degree of impartiality in the way in which one uses evidence. And the other end of the spectrum, it's also abundantly clear that all of us as historians are human beings; the things we find interesting and the things we find important are strongly influenced by what we experience in our day-to-day lives.

As of today – thinking of the three fields you mentioned – we are looking at across Mi'kma'ki very important issues about resource harvesting as they relate to the Marshall decision,[8] we're witnessing environmental change, a climate crisis that has been deceptively, I suppose, pushed out of people's immediate consciousness in the last five or six months. But it's still there. And what was it pushed out by? A pandemic. So, it is always important to retain the integrity of our methods, but nevertheless to recognize that as human beings we do frame our questions in light of what is going on in society and impacting our lives.

Another example of this would be the great development of women's history in the 1970s and 1980s, where the women's historians who became active in that era and in many cases are still active, were and are historians in the finest sense of people who observed and advanced the integral methods of the discipline; but at the same time it's no accident that second-wave feminism was then in many of its most important and creative phases. So that kind of dynamic is nothing new, but it does tend to influence the areas that are historically current. Just as clearly, the upsurge of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, following the death of George Floyd, has underlined what has always been true of the crucial importance of every facet of – in *Acadiensis* terms – African Nova Scotian history and Black history of all kinds in Atlantic Canada.

7 E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961).

8 *R. v. Marshall*, [1999] 3 S.C.R. 456.

So where I think we are more attuned to now in the 21st century is how current concerns and historical awareness interact with each other, and probably one of the classic cases is the debate about statues. There are people who are very skeptical of the move to be critical of statues and other forms of commemoration, who sort of say, look, the focus on statues is narrowly symbolic and it ignores the real and pressing issues that are out there – it's a waste of time. But I think what as historians we have become much more confident in dealing with is the way people are aware of the past, the way the past becomes present in people's consciousness, and that it is a critical area of study. This is a growing area in itself, and it does relate to, for example, the important work of people such as Ian McKay and Robin Bates in that area.[9] But also, I think, public debate brings our attention to other significant areas and crossovers so that, for example, the Cornwallis controversy as a public area of debate brings our attention to areas like awareness of the past, but it also brings public attention to Indigenous history and gives an opportunity to promote serious and productive discussion. So, I think that's one area that, through more sophisticated dealing with just how the past enters into consciousness, becomes a very good example where the fields do evolve, and evolve not only as discrete fields but in association with each other.

Mrazek: As a historian of biography, do you think the current political climate and collective interest in polemic personalities like [Donald] Trump, are going to result in political biographies becoming more abundant in mainstream history? And in my reading of *Acadiensis* there have been biographies, but they didn't strike me as a major focal point in its historiography. Do you think political biographies or works on cult of personalities might become more popular, or popular again?

Reid: Maybe. Well, I'm not sure how much would be new in that. As an undergraduate I went to St. Catherine's College at Oxford and the head of the college was Alan Bullock, and his best-known book, a book that was recognized clearly at that time as being of central historiographical importance was *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*.[10] And obviously there are many other biographies that

9 Ian McKay and Robin Bates, *In the Province of History: The Making of the Public Past in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

10 Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (New York: Bantam Books, 1952).

attempted to make sense of that era, not solely in terms of fascism and Nazism but by studying individuals who then came to represent much more than an individual. And to take an entirely different example, in Canadian history in the 1950s, studies of Macdonald and Brown and others were really a kind of central area in Canadian historiography.[11] That kind of historiography later came under significant critique, rightly I think, but biography and history have always gone together – somewhat uneasily – in the sense that there are many kinds of biography, and they're not all historical. But it certainly seems to me that biography, if it is carried out according to the right kind of methodology, that biography is a form of history. So it may well be that biography of political leaders may, as historians try to make sense of what's taking place in the early 21st century, become a more central kind of historiography again, although it seems to me that what is really new and exciting in biography, now, is what falls, in one way or another, into the realm of writing historical biographies of people who would not traditionally have been the subject of historical biography. To take a couple of very recent examples, within the last two or three months, Kirrily Freeman's article in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, on Charlie Some, the South African who became part of the No. 2 Construction Battalion, and likewise, Amani Whitfield's article in the *CHR*, which comes from his biographical project on enslaved people in the Maritime colonies.[12] Those, to me, are two very, very innovative approaches that really show where biography can take us. I do think we are into a time when biography is taking us to places where traditional biography has not. And that's a sign of the vitality of the field, because both of these are in Atlantic Canada history, and even if not published in *Acadiensis* – I won't add "unfortunately" – they're published in pretty good journals, and for the recording device I am being facetious. But they are both in Atlantic Canada history and these are truly ground-breaking articles showing what can be done in terms of historical biography of people of African descent in quite different eras, and it just shows again that fields evolve, fields enrich each other, and biography can be very much a part of that.

---

11 Donald Creighton, *Sir John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1952) and *Sir John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955); J.M.S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe: Voice of Upper Canada, 1818-1859* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1959) and B*rown of the Globe: Statesman of Confederation, 1860-1880* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1963).

12 Kirrily Freeman, "Charlie's War: The Life and Death of a Black South African in the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48, no. 3 (2020): 456-90; Harvey Amani Whitfield, "White Archives, Black Fragments: Problems and Possibilities in Telling the Lives of Enslaved Black People in the Maritimes," *Canadian Historical Review* 101, no. 3 (September 2020): 323-45.

Mrazek: While you were just talking, I was taken back in time to your Biography and History seminar at SMU. And for our last question: the 1990s was a watershed moment, in terms of social history, new methodologies, and theoretical frameworks, a moment of everything kind of coming together. Do you think there's another watershed on the horizon? Another "New History"?

Reid: Indigenous history, for example, is extremely vibrant and while it's difficult to predict a watershed moment as such – it's very important to think that way. But it's much easier to identify a watershed moment in retrospect than it is to predict – Indigenous history is, I think, at a very exciting moment, in large part because of the presence of so many productive Indigenous scholars. We've already talked about how people's formation and background impact the questions that get asked, and, for a long time, people would publish in Indigenous history in journals like *Acadiensis* who frequently had been trained in a non-Indigenous kind of way or methodology. Valuable as these contributions are, I think there's a tremendous opportunity now for different approaches to come together in Indigenous history. I think also, in that we talked a moment or two ago about historical awareness and consciousness and historical memory, that there is a tremendous opportunity to explore that in the context of Indigenous history. So I think there certainly are elements that are ready to coalesce there, whether they will coalesce immediately or whether it will take time that remains to be seen. Environmental history, again, with NiCHE and with publications like the recent collection on the Gulf, put together by Claire Campbell, Ed MacDonald, and Brian Payne, I think those are showing the way.[13] And these are all fields where, again, the development of new forms of publishing has become really important. *ActiveHistory*, obviously, in many areas. NiCHE in terms of environmental history, the *Acadiensis* blog itself, the *Borealia* blog. So I do think that kind of communication is terrifically important in the ability for ideas to circulate quickly, and to reinforce each other in a very immediate kind of way, and I think we'll see a lot more of that.

COURTNEY MRAZEK WITH JOHN G. REID

13 Claire E. Campbell, Edward MacDonald, and Brian Payne, eds., *The Greater Gulf: Essays on the Environmental History of the Gulf of St Lawrence* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2020).

COURTNEY MRAZEK est une doctorante allochtone au Département d'histoire de l'Université du Nouveau-Brunswick. Sa thèse examine les effets que les politiques eugéniques et euthéniques des gouvernements fédéral et provinciaux en matière de santé ont eus sur la santé des Mi'kmaq au sein des institutions et dans le cadre des initiatives de santé publique en Nouvelle-Écosse au 20e siècle. Ces politiques ont contribué aux disparités en santé, les ont accentuées et les ont perpétuées jusqu'à ce jour.

COURTNEY MRAZEK is a settler PhD candidate in the Department of History at the University of New Brunswick, and her dissertation examines how eugenic and euthenic federal and provincial health policies affected Mi'kmaq health institutionally and through public health initiatives in 20th-century Nova Scotia. These health policies contributed to, deepened, and perpetuated health disparities that persist today.

JOHN G. REID est professeur émérite au Département d'histoire de l'Université Saint Mary's. Ses domaines de recherche comprennent le Nord-Est de l'Amérique du Nord du début de l'ère moderne, en particulier les relations entre l'empire et les Autochtones, ainsi que la biographie, l'éducation supérieure et, récemment, le sport du cricket. Il a apporté une contribution importante à l'historiographie du Canada atlantique tant par son propre travail que par son mentorat exercé auprès d'étudiants et étudiantes et de collègues à tous les niveaux.

JOHN G. REID is a professor emeritus in the Department of History at Saint Mary's University. His research areas include early modern northeastern North America, specifically imperial relations between Indigenous peoples and Europeans, biography, higher education, and, recently, cricket. He has significantly contributed to Atlantic Canadian historiography, both in his own work and by being a mentor to students and colleagues at all levels.