

Wooden Ships and Iron Men Revisited

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Reviews/Revues

Wooden Ships and Iron Men Revisited

Our perspective of nineteenth-century Atlantic Canada is dominated by the image of an "age of sail". The fact that a century ago this region ranked as the world's fourth largest shipping power is remembered with nostalgic yearning. The rise and fall of the fleet of locally built wooden sailing vessels has come to be seen as the single most important event in the history of Atlantic Canada. With the passing of the regional merchant marine, it is said, came a transition from creative self-assertion to stagnant dependence. No one did more to foster this image than Frederick W. Wallace. His pioneering explorations of nineteenth-century British American shipping left a powerful imprint on the popular mind.¹ Using a blend of anecdote and encyclopaedic detail, Wallace constructed an heroic view of the past, one ideally suited to a public demoralized by the economic and social chaos of the 1920s. Wallace's romantic portrait of the regional merchant marine has persisted since then. Recently, however, in response both to a general "renaissance" in Atlantic Canada historiography and to an expansion of archival holdings relating to shipping, a series of books and articles have appeared dealing with the "age of sail". This new work demands examination in order to discern the extent to which the image built by Wallace is now being altered.

It must be said at once that much of the recent literature is anything but revisionist in character. In many cases, the assumptions and methodology employed by Wallace have been faithfully adhered to in the course of correcting and amplifying the details of his publications. This is particularly true of Louise Manny's *Ships of the Miramichi* (Saint John, New Brunswick Museum, Historical Studies, no. 10, 1960) and Esther Clark Wright's *Saint John Ships and Their Builders* (Wolfville, the author, 1975). Both authors concentrate on the accumulation of such detail as the names of vessels and their builders, tonnage, rig, date of construction, ultimate disposition, etc. Wright includes a brief introductory overview of the industry, but her comments are essentially descriptive and adhere closely to the conceptualization employed by Wallace. Readers looking for new insight will be disappointed; they may also be deterred by the tendency, particularly on the part of Wright, to present a massive amount of evidence, unrelieved by either anecdote or interpretive generalization. Much of Wallace's appeal, it must not be forgotten, lay in his ability to tell a good story.

Considerably more readable are John P. Parker's *Sails of the Maritimes* (Halifax, Maritime Museum of Canada, 1960); his *Cape Breton Ships and*

1 Frederick W. Wallace, *Wooden Ships and Iron Men* (London, 1924); *In the Wake of the Wind-Ships* (Toronto, 1927).

Men (n.p., the author, 1967); Stanley Spicer's *Masters of Sail* (Toronto, Ryerson, 1968); and Charles Armour and Thomas Lackey's *Sailing Ships of the Maritimes* (Toronto, McGraw-Hill, 1975). These authors, some sharing Wallace's experience of working at sea, approach the age of sail from something of a "sailor's eye" perspective. They are excellent at explaining such things as shipyard operations, the role of the various building trades, vessel layout, work routines at sea, the evolution of rig design, technological innovation, etc. Colourful anecdotes and dramatic incidents are provided and the texts are lavishly illustrated with drawings, photographs and paintings. Illustration is particularly emphasized in the Armour-Lackey volume, a work designed to appeal to the coffee-table market. The visual and literary quality of these volumes assures them of a wide readership and Spicer's *Masters of Sail* has succeeded Wallace's books as the standard text on the Maritime merchant marine. It is doubtful, however, whether any of this work can be categorized as revisionist. Spicer, admittedly, does profess to be trying to transcend heroic romance to offer a new realism. At one point he declares: "for the men who sailed the ships it was a hard, tough life. For the owners it was a gamble" (pp. 7 - 8). In the end, though, the darker aspects of the industry tend more to be explained away than used to recast the image of the age of sail. Spicer essentially emerges as a disciple of Wallace, content to work within a conceptual design set down fifty years earlier.

The hazards of intellectual inertia become readily apparent when one compares the works cited above with classic studies of the shipping industries of the United States and Britain. Scholars such as John Hutchins and Ralph Davis have gone beyond anecdote and antiquarian detail to offer fascinating analysis of the dynamics involved in the emergence of shipping as a component of a national economy.² The challenge for the historians of Atlantic Canada is to develop an assessment of the regional merchant marine comparable in depth to what has been done for the neighbouring metropolitan societies. Fortunately, preliminary efforts toward meeting this challenge are already in being.

The pioneer in establishing a revisionist critique of the "age of sail" was Peter D. McClelland. In a doctoral dissertation on the place of the timber industry within the nineteenth-century economy of New Brunswick, McClelland advanced the case for a fundamental reassessment of the importance of regional shipping and shipbuilding.³ In essence, he argued that

2 John G. B. Hutchins, *The American Maritime Industries and Public Policy, 1789 - 1914* (Cambridge, 1941); Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry* (London, 1792).

3 Peter Dean McClelland, "The New Brunswick Economy in the Nineteenth Century" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Harvard, 1966); "The New Brunswick Economy in the Nineteenth Century", *Journal of Political Economy*, 25 (1965), pp. 686 - 90.

the merchant marine had exercised no more than a marginal impact on the local economy. Drawing upon the techniques of economic history, McClelland produced evidence showing that, during its brief heyday, the New Brunswick shipping industry had employed only a miniscule proportion of the total work force, had contributed minimally to gross provincial product, and had produced "a negligible impact on the capital formation."⁴ It was an activity, McClelland maintained, which failed to generate the kind of diversification required for sustained economic growth. Moreover, it weakened the entrepreneurial competence of the local business community by perpetuating dependence on the British metropolis and instilling a preference for speculative gain. McClelland concluded his revisionist assault with the comment: "What claim it [shipping] has to prominence in the literature must . . . rest more in the romantic qualities of the industry than on its function as a 'linchpin' to New Brunswick prosperity".⁵

McClelland's iconoclastic interpretation appeared during the mid-1960s but went largely ignored over the succeeding decade. This situation probably resulted from lack of general access to his work and a scarcity of economic historians operating in the field. Whatever the cause, prospects for an elaboration of the revisionist perspective on the "age of sail" languished until 1976, when the Maritime History Group at Memorial University of Newfoundland launched their Atlantic Canada Shipping Project (hereafter identified as A.C.S.P.). A team of researchers, skilled in both traditional and quantitative research techniques, came together "to examine, describe and as far as possible, explain the rise and fall of the shipping industry in the region".⁶ While defining their ultimate objectives in the broadest possible terms, the project organizers decided to begin with a comprehensive survey of the merchant fleets of five key ports: St. John's, Charlottetown, Halifax, Yarmouth and Saint John. The information gleaned, they promised, would be interpreted within the general context of social and economic change taking place across the region, nation and world. At last the profession had resumed the initiative launched by McClelland.

Preliminary evaluation of the Memorial project is now possible, thanks to the publication *Ships and Shipbuilding in the North Atlantic Region*, edited by Keith Matthews and Gerald Panting (St. John's, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1978). The book contains the proceedings of a conference of the A.C.S.P. which took place in St. John's, 31 March - April 1977. The conference involved papers and discussion focused on Canadian

4 McClelland, "New Brunswick Economy", p. 164.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 234 - 5.

6 Keith Matthews, "The Shipping Industry of Atlantic Canada: Themes and Problems", in *Ships and Shipbuilding in the North Atlantic Region*, p. 3.

and British shipping of the nineteenth century. Canadian submissions, particularly those by A.C.S.P. researchers, dominated the conference proceedings, both in terms of quality and quantity. They alone will be considered in this review.

The first three papers in the collection, by Eric Sager, Lewis Fischer and David Alexander, offer a preliminary overview of the shipping registered between 1840 and 1889 at the ports of St. John's, Charlottetown and Yarmouth. The authors follow a common format, building their papers around a series of statistical tables showing total vessel registration by rig and tonnage, 1840 - 1889; average tonnage by rig and decade; new registration by decade or cycle; net fleet size and growth rate, 1840 - 1889; place of build; and ownership according to residence, occupation and rig preference. (Some additional detail is found in the Alexander paper, the most sophisticated of the three.) Compilation of these tables represents a major innovative achievement on the part of the A.C.S.P. The official shipping abstracts, upon which earlier work has had to rely, lack the accuracy and detail required to obtain a sharply focused portrait of the regional merchant marine. The A.C.S.P. team have met this problem by embarking on a massive exercise in record reconstruction. The original individual vessel registrations, obtained from Board of Trade files in London, have been transcribed and placed into a computerized data bank. Thus the methodology of the "new economic history" has removed a decisive obstacle to reassessment of the age of sail.

At one level the revised abstracts of the A.C.S.P. do no more than confirm the familiar account of the rise and fall of Atlantic Canada shipping. It is shown that the venture into the international carrying trade with relatively large, square-rigged vessels began in the 1840s. The enterprise expanded, more or less continually, until the mid-1870s. Then a rapid retreat set in so that by the 1890s, the regional high seas fleet had virtually disappeared. The special value of the A.C.S.P. methodology, however, is that it allows the researcher to penetrate further into fleet dynamics than was ever before possible. Cyclical fluctuations within the industry, trends in terms of rig, vessel life expectancy, building specialization, ownership distribution, etc., can be examined with much more precision. This is the area in which these three papers make their major contribution.

The dominant impression that emerges from the work of Sager, Fischer, and Alexander is of a regional shipping industry characterized by greater instability, local variation and elitism than has hitherto been appreciated. On the first point, while long term trends toward expansion and contraction did exist, shipbuilding and shipowning remained prey to short-term fluctuations, often ones assuming boom and bust proportions. The 1860s and 1870s stand out as the chronological focus of the "golden age", but even they were marked by dramatic upheavals in the level of shipping activity. The problems inherent in chronic uncertainty as to what the future would bring

must be considered in any explanation of the industry's ultimate fate. As for variation within the region, the authors make it clear that Yarmouth alone fitted the classic model of Maritime shipping. Newfoundland never achieved more than marginal participation in high seas commerce and P.E.I. failed, through the 1850s and 1860s, to increase the proportion of its total fleet devoted to operation beyond coastal waters. Furthermore, while Yarmouth entrepreneurs retained a large merchant fleet under local control, their P.E.I. counterparts were largely content to build for quick speculative sale in the British market. Again, the implications of this fragmented response to opportunity will have to be dealt with in any interpretative overview of the industry. With respect to elite control, while the authors demonstrate that ship building retained a geographically dispersed character, ownership came to be the preserve of a narrow segment of regional society. An affluent core of merchants, the bulk of them residing in a few urban communities, held sway over the ocean-going segment of the Atlantic Canada shipping. Accordingly, the quality of leadership exerted by this entrepreneurial group was crucial to the industry's destiny. Integration of these and other characteristics of the regional shipping industry into an overall revisionist interpretation has yet to be carried out. A.C.S.P. personnel stress that their work is still in a preliminary stage. They prefer to proceed with further exploration of the "what" of nineteenth-century shipping in Atlantic Canada before accepting the challenge of answering the question "why" in any general sense.

Somewhat greater ambition is embodied in the one other Canadian paper presented at the 1977 conference on shipping. Richard Rice of McGill has no hesitation in arguing an explicit thesis in a submission entitled "Measuring British dominance of shipbuilding in the Maritimes, 1787 - 1890". Rice employs quantitative techniques as a means of giving new precision to the familiar assumption that the British market remained "the longterm, fundamental economic influence on Maritime (and Quebec) shipbuilding".⁷ Figures are compiled showing that British and colonial building cycles moved in harmony and that the bulk of colonial vessels, when sold, were disposed of through the British market. Unfortunately, the appeal of Rice's conclusion is undermined by his methods of data collection. In contrast to the A.C.S.P., which offers comprehensive record reconstruction, Rice provides only speculative projections based on very partial record samples. The tentative nature of the statistics which result, necessarily induces scepticism on the part of the reader. Comparison is perhaps unfair since no individual can muster the resources of a research team. Nevertheless, until

7 Rice, "Measuring British Dominance", in *Ships and Shipbuilding in the North Atlantic Region*, p. 111.

Rice adopts a more credible methodology, his work will remain unconvincing.

The overall impression emerging from examination of the 1977 shipping conference proceedings is that the A.C.S.P. group dominates the new research into the Maritime "age of sail". Their work is unmatched either in terms of scope or methodological sophistication. Moreover, they are already establishing a remarkably prolific performance in terms of publication.⁸ Apart from asking why Quebec was excluded as a port for analysis, one has little about which to complain. To request definitive conclusions at this stage would clearly be asking too much. One has to be content with tentative hints such as when Sager suggests that the distinctive character of the Newfoundland merchant marine derived essentially from the particular dynamics of the cod fishery.

Ultimately, of course, the A.S.C.P. must come to grips with the broad interpretative issues raised by McClelland and referred to in the introduction to the shipping conference proceedings. For example, exactly what accounts for the initial take-off in the 1840s toward sustained involvement in the international carrying trade? Why was there such a variation from community to community in terms of the entrepreneurial response to opportunities in shipping? Why did some areas remain at the level of "ship-building factories" while others plunged directly into the freighting business? What role did British timber/ship brokers play in the evolution of regional shipping? What kinds of profits and losses were generated by the industry? Why did the industry fail to achieve renewal through technological innovation? Finally, what was the overall impact of shipbuilding and ship owning on the society and economy of Atlantic Canada? The essential test of the A.C.S.P. will lie in the extent to which it can cope with questions such as these.

Out of all this emerges the conclusion that for the first time in fifty years, F. W. Wallace is being subjected to a systematic re-examination. The assumptions embodied in his image of a nineteenth-century "age of sail" are being tested by a combination of new evidence and innovative research techniques. It must be emphasized that the work of re-evaluation, as embodied by the A.C.S.P. is very much an ongoing process. A comprehensive revisionist synthesis has yet to emerge. In this situation, other researchers, both amateur and professional, should not hesitate to draw upon the resources of the A.C.S.P. The Memorial team are eager to share their continually growing data base as well as provide advice on quantitative methodology. Ideally this would allow the A.C.S.P. to establish itself as the nucleus of an expanding body of research, one employing a blend of traditional and innovative investigative techniques. Only in this way can the massive challenge of building an

8 See, for example, David Alexander and Gerry Panting, "The Mercantile Fleet and its Owners: Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, 1840 - 1889", *Acadiensis*, VII (Spring, 1978), pp. 3 - 28.

all-embracing overview of nineteenth-century shipping in Atlantic Canada be met. The prospects for discovery are exciting: we can only regret that Wallace is not here to share in the work of his successors.

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The Maritimes and Canadian Political Culture

One of the most enduring descriptions of the Maritimes characterizes the region as innately conservative, insufficiently innovative, and unnecessarily tradition-bound. In the historiography of Canadian politics the Maritimes often comes off a shabby second-best, for political analysts have found that the conservative stereotype provides a pleasant counter-melody to the broad theme of twentieth-century political modernization. In the light of the gradual triumph of efficient bureaucracy over the politics of personal favoritism, it is convenient to emphasize the pork-barrel politics and traditional partyism of the Maritimes, while neglecting its progressive accomplishments or instances of political volatility. The point here is not that Maritime political conservatism is a myth, or even that progressive liberalism is a virtue, but that the character of Maritime politics is imperfectly understood. What is called the innate political conservatism of the Maritimes is at once a product of and a reaction against the centralizing character of Canada's economic and political system, and might more appropriately be termed political cynicism.

In the United States, the political and economic centralization implicit in the progressive reform impulse has received considerable attention in recent years. Samuel Hays, James Weinstein, Robert Wiebe and others have demonstrated that rapid industrialization and national economic integration occasioned a systematic attempt to create a more orderly, efficient, and cohesive political culture.¹ The result was the erosion of a traditional, grass-roots, patronage-style politics based upon the principle of local representation. In *The Decline of Politics: The Conservatives and the Party System 1901 - 1920* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1977), John English places Robert Borden firmly within this progressive tradition, demonstrating how Borden's sense of "public responsibility" affected the Conservative party from the time of his selection as party leader in 1901 to the collapse of Union

1 Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885 - 1914* (Chicago, 1957); Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of American Conservatism. A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900 - 1916* (Chicago, 1962); Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877 - 1920* (New York, 1967) and *Businessmen and Reform* (Cambridge, 1962); James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State: 1900 - 1918* (Boston, 1968); and Louis Galambos, with Barbara Barrow Spence, *The Public Image of Big Business in America, 1880 - 1940. A Quantitative Study in Social Change* (Baltimore, 1975).