

## A Ride on the Rapido

Cole Harris

Volume 10, numéro 2, spring 1981

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad10\\_2rv01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad10_2rv01)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

### ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce document

Harris, C. (1981). A Ride on the Rapido. *Acadiensis*, 10(2), 139–143.

# Reviews/Revues

## A Ride on the Rapido

7:30 a.m. In line for the Rapido to Toronto in Central Station, Montreal. I am approached by a little man, late middle age, who shakes my hand warmly and ventures that he is from Cape Breton. An example, I assume, of Maritime friendliness until he asks for breakfast money. I tell him that I don't have much but get out my wallet. We survey my three dollars. I give him one. Thanking me, he returns to his place in the line.

8:00 a.m. Moving slowly through St. Henri, Herbert Ames' *City below the Hill*. Beyond the tracks and sheds are rows of late nineteenth-century duplexes, their brick exteriors and general style from industrial Britain, but their wooden insides a plank version of a *pièce sur pièce* building technique that goes back to medieval France. The man next to me is another Cape Bretoner. We talk about his island. The heavy water plant is "a farce"; the steel mill is "rediculous". It should be closed. But there is lots of coal and it is "looking good". Some strip mining now and the land is well reclaimed. The fish are returning. The two hundred mile limit and the scientists are bringing back the fish — "they asked us to give them a chance and they was right". The draggers should be better regulated, but Romeo LeBlanc is a "tough" minister of fisheries. This Cape Bretoner looks about fifty but may be sixty. He began fishing from a dory when he was thirteen, and since has worked on the draggers and in the mines. He has also worked intermittently in Toronto for Simpson's and for Campbell's Soups.

8:30 a.m. Off Montreal Island and running rapidly west. I settle down with two well-illustrated books on Nova Scotia that I am to review for *Acadiensis*.<sup>1</sup> Not excited by Hans Weber's photography in *Window on the Sea*, but suspect that he has not been well served by his printer. The textures of Nova Scotia are there: the shingles, fogs, boats, spruce forests and weathered faces. But a lot of the photographs seem anonymous and placeless — coloured leaves on water — until I discover their relationship to Ernest Buckler's prose-poems. Presumably a blurred photograph of a seagull in flight renders "the gull-shaped thought in the thought-shaped gull", but I can make little of that and of much of Buckler's exaggerated text, a Whitmanesque extravaganza that does not work. "Hippopotamus rocks" at Peggy's Cove? In a sense, but the metaphor is stretched. Those hippos belong in the "great, grey-green, greasy Limpopo River, all set about with fever-trees". When Buckler pulls back from this affected style, he writes a simple prose that can wind together generations and land as, to use one of his favourite images, old women wind cloth and memories in their rugs. The tale "Man and Snowman", his best writing in *Window on the Sea*, juxtaposes the drifting thoughts of a dying man in an upstairs bedroom and the

1 Ernest Buckler and Hans Weber, *Nova Scotia: Window on the Sea* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1978); Peter Barss, *Images of Lunenburg County* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1978).

bustle of younger generations below. Buckler can be pithy and authoritative. "Its main contrasts are not many" he says of his province, but hardly follows this arresting lead. On the whole this collaboration of author and photographer to evoke the Nova Scotian soul is too diffuse, and much of Buckler too meretricious, for my taste. The Nova Scotian beside me would shake an uncomprehending head over the text; I am slightly uncomfortable reading this essentially pretentious book, which after all is about him, in his presence.

I turn to the smaller volume by Peter Barss, immediately like its black and white photographs, and wonder why they are so much more effective than Weber's. More focus — all the photos are about fishermen and their lives in Lunenburg County — a sharper photographic eye for detail and contrast, and a far clearer purpose. That purpose is to illustrate a disappearing fishery. Barss has recorded the reminiscences of older Lunenburgers and his text comprises carefully grouped selections of their recollections and comments about fishing and the fishing life in the days when men put out for the banks in schooners like the Bluenose and fished from dories. Their telling is vivid and moving: work and fatigue, storms, friends drowned, wrecks escaped, unrelenting captains, unbelievable pay — one man earned 29¢ after paltry deductions for a summer's work — pranks, affection for the sea, pessimistic speculations about the future. These are numbing tales from the impossibly hard lives that so many lived for so many generations.

Through the Lunenburgers, this small book catches the tens of thousands of anonymous men who, from the Bretons, Portuguese, and Spaniards in the sixteenth century, came without motors, radios, radar, and weather reports to fish the banks. Fishing technology and organization changed somewhat over the years, but to be on the banks in a dory in the 1920s was to be as dependent on the elements and on one's own muscle and skill as the first fisherman to come there. This was a pre-industrial world that, like the planks in St. Henri, stretched back out of sight through countless lives. This work came apart within the lifetimes of these Lunenburgers as it did for others almost two hundred years before in early industrializing Britain, and as it will do for yet others throughout the Third World. Modernity has no single or static face but, if there is no common model of modernization, there is no denying the enormous power of motorized technology to change patterns of life. These tales sit at a common crossroad.

The pre-industrial world of these fishermen strikes me for its harshness. At a time when few men worked as few as eight hours a day, no North American whites worked longer hours in more cramped and dangerous circumstances and for less pay than they did. On the banks work often began before 3:00 a.m. and ended fifteen to twenty hours later. Now and then men toppled asleep into their fish. Death was at hand, a part of fishing. A captain might, but might not, go back to look for a dory in a blow; a man pulled from death on the rocks would be fishing ten minutes later. Boys moved into this life at thirteen or fourteen, and most never learned enough or earned enough to try anything else. If the price of

fish seemed no more subject to a fisherman's control than the weather, fishing was less a commercial enterprise than a way of life that, to judge by many of these Lunenburgers, is often remembered with affection. Many a son is warned away from fishing only because his father feels that the ocean has been "emptied right out".

Fishing as a way of life. In my province, British Columbia, occupations also became ways of life; men thought of themselves as miners or loggers and as such moved among the camps looking for work. This work force was separated from stable communities. Men were characteristically single, were hundreds or thousands of miles from their birthplaces — a few were from Lunenburg — and would drift through the camps of the Coast or the Cordillera for most of their working lives. If an occupation was theirs, a place was not. On the other hand, these Lunenburgers and their people before them had lived where they lived for eight generations. From there fishermen went out to sea and, God willing, returned. Their lives were rooted in families and communities, and the paraphernalia of fishing, as Barss's photographs show so well, surrounded their lives just as the paraphernalia of farming surrounds the lives of a settled agricultural population. When the fishery could take no more fishermen, just as when an agricultural area could take no more farmers, the young would leave, striking out from a place and probably from an occupation, and carrying the memories of extended family, camaraderie, and custom created by generations of living where a founding population had grown with little addition from immigration. British Columbia — and much of western North America — is turned the other way around. Without such roots there is a fundamentally different texture.

Living with roots gives life a definition that is lacking in British Columbia. People know themselves by knowing their surroundings. They grow up knowing the genealogy of almost everyone around, and their own fit, and their people's fit, in this social web. They know the weather, the rocks, the tides, the seasons and the material textures of the settlement because they have always lived with them and because, until recently, the pace of change in the human landscape has not been much more rapid than in the natural landscape. They fish and become the wives of fishermen because that is what young people do, what parents and grandparents did before them. Their skills are those of a particular technology and place; an outsider coming to live among them seems as awkward as they do when living outside. In these respects, too, Lunenburg catches a common quality of the pre-industrial world. Presumably some spirits rebelled at the definition of such lives, but those who had hardly glimpsed another world would hardly have felt rebellion or resignation or have found anything very special in their circumstances. They lived as they lived because they lived.

Perhaps this has something to do with what, to a person from my urban, middle class background, is the fishermen's remarkable nonchalance in the face of death and, unless Barss has filtered out protest, with their even more remarkable acceptance of abominable working conditions and pay. Perhaps it is not

just that men confronted death regularly in their working lives, but also that the importance of an individual life, even of one's own, recedes in cultures where individuals find definition in the group. Does a familiar environment — a known, ongoing place and its people — provide a sustaining illusion of immortality? And these fishermen apparently considered the price of fish and the conditions of work to be as given as the weather; their recollections convey no sense that the terms of work could be influenced by human action. In British Columbia, on the other hand, protest was part of labour almost from the first sawmills or hard-rock mines, a type of protest that apparently only recently has become part of the Nova Scotian fishery. Why this difference? Is it that in British Columbia work was abstracted from community and custom to become, baldly, a contractual arrangement subject to negotiation and dispute? Is it that the Lunenburg fisherman perceived his labour not as contract but as custom? Here, perhaps, is another edge of the preindustrial world.

*12:30 p.m.* Now approaching Toronto. I pass Barss over to my neighbour who soon passes him back with a comment about “them Dutch fellers” in Lunenburg who end sentences with “you”. Now I want to know about his life as a fisherman, and out pours exactly what I have been reading for the last two hours. He quit school to go fishing with his father, cut cod tongues, bought his own dory at fifteen, earned a cent-and-a-half a pound for fish, worked interminable hours and sometimes toppled asleep from exhaustion. “If the fish came back should the old ways be revived?” I ask. “No”, he answers, “they were just too hard. No one would want them back”. Then he tells me that no one wanted to leave, that he hated his years in Toronto, that he dreamed there of codfish and the sea, that he would rather earn 50¢ a day on Cape Breton than \$100 a day in Toronto, that Toronto had been ruined by money, that the Cape Bretoners had no money but were spiritually rich, and that he once knew everyone from Cape North to Louisbourg (which I don't believe). He points to adjacent suburban houses, and speculates that the families in them would not know each other. His people came from St. Pierre. His grandmother did not speak English, and he has never spoken French. By this time we have arrived. I tell him how much I have enjoyed our conversation. “So did I, sir”, he replies.

*1:00 p.m.* On a bench in Union Station jotting some notes about the conversation just finished. My stomach is complaining. Two dollars did not seem enough for breakfast on the train. Might as well have given all three to the other Cape Bretoner.

*1:30 p.m.* In the head office of the Bank of Montreal in Toronto, surrounded by glass, carpets, sculptured copper plant stands, inner city chic, and hundreds of thousands of feet of skyscraper office space. Try for the second time in my life to use my Multi-Branch Banking card. Last summer in Cape Breton the computers were not hooked up. This time it works. I have a hundred dollars, know my balance in Vancouver (larger than expected), and am directed down an

escalator to cheap lunch places below. My head is still full of fishermen and 29¢ summers.

1:35 p.m. Table at the Philly Mignon. Eating a bun with slices of steak and melted cheese and facing a red sports car on display. Musing about my ample university salary deposited automatically, and about this trip, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, for work on an historical atlas of Canada. The subject of that atlas was in the seat beside me from Montreal, and in those Lunenburg tales. I am unable to sort out the relationship between my own overwhelmingly comfortable circumstances and those lives, but I know that they and I are linked across a continent in all sorts of curious ways, and I feel a responsibility that I don't quite know how to discharge. Musing about the future of outport Nova Scotia. Buckler and the Lunenburgers are not hopeful. But if the fish are coming back, an abundant fishery could stretch as far ahead as behind. In that case, is there middle ground between the draggers, skyscrapers, and placeless urban polish on the one hand, and fifteen hours day after day in a dory? No one would wish such work on any man; but were there not precious qualities in the communities of rooted people out of which fishing took place. How much business for psychiatrists, I wonder, is generated by the several acres surrounding me? I suspect that most people are relatively simple, requiring some physical work, some — but not too many — material comforts, and warm, stable, personal relations; wonder why, amid affluence, these staples of life are so elusive; and suspect that there was more of them in traditional Nova Scotia than here in downtown Toronto. For some reason I think of Peter Kropotkin, the aristocratic Russian geographer and anarchist of another era, who would have loved the Lunenburgers and would have said that a middle ground is always available when enough people are determined to have it.

COLE HARRIS

### Beyond the Gallery and the Archives

Among several manifestations of rising interest in the history of Atlantic Canada during the 1970s is the growing attention paid to the visual record of the region. Just over a decade ago, the pictorial documentation of early Atlantic Canadian settlement was scattered, difficult to survey, and underutilized. Indeed, Ralph Greenhill's seminal study, *Early Photography in Canada* (Toronto, 1965), virtually ignored developments east of Quebec City, and illustrations for provincial and regional histories were usually drawn from valuable, but familiar collections such as the idiosyncratic Webster Canadiana Collection in the New Brunswick Museum. The last decade, however, has seen the appearance of several major pictorial compilations depicting facets of the regional past. Recently published guides to the historical photograph collections