

Back to the Future: A Discussion

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D.A. MUISE commented that the process of creating a Newfoundland history must have involved some particular form of agency. Who decided to make Newfoundland studies a focus for Memorial University? J.K. HILLER responded that this was part of J.R. Smallwood's idea of what the university would do when it was created. It would be a focus for culture and history and the provincial identity. It was Smallwood's view that the Newfoundland identity would be enhanced, not diminished, by Confederation with Canada. One of the first acts of the province was the formation of the university as a degree-granting institution. The development of the university was one of the early administrative decisions to place emphasis on the province.

NAOMI GRIFFITHS commented that she was struck by the lack of reference in the discussion to the francophone community in the region. This was an illustration of the particular "déformation professionnelle" of historical practitioners in the region. Why were there such solitudes? In general there was no attention to issues of nationalism and identity formation, as represented in the work of Ernest Gellner or E.J. Hobsbawm. P.A. BUCKNER acknowledged there was a problem. Although there was attention to ethnicity, Acadia has its own historical logic. BROOK TAYLOR stated that the organizers' goal in these retrospective sessions was to celebrate and discuss the work of that first generation of regional scholars and promote a process of critical evaluation of that period. The panels were representative of that period, even if the voices were more limited than they would be by today's standards. These are the tributaries that show us where we have been.

MARGARET CONRAD agreed that the Acadian renaissance had not been adequately incorporated into the overview of regional history in the presentations, and the same was true of the feminist developments that have taken place. She went on to raise two questions. One of them was to ask, what was the value of a regional perspective? She was concerned that a Maritime regional perspective could overshadow some provincial issues that need to be dealt with. She also pointed out that in preparing the manuscript for a new illustrated history of the region, she and her co-author J.K. Hiller have had to anguish over fitting in the several elements within the region, which numbered as many as three sub-regions for Newfoundland and seven for the Maritime Provinces. This gives a different sense of how the region looks internally. There is also the issue of how to bring a regional perspective to a general survey of Canadian history, such as the *History of the Canadian Peoples*. British Columbia and Newfoundland both need more attention in the next edition of this text. She concluded that we may need to revisit the value of region as a concept. Should we follow the lead of Ian McKay, who has attempted in his recently published address

* This is a summary of the discussion following the "Back to the Future, I" and "Back to the Future, II" sessions at the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, 5 May 2000.

to the Atlantic Canada Workshop to reconcile social and cultural approaches with political and economic ones by emphasizing the common theme of the liberal project? And secondly, she questioned the optimism that speakers had brought to the discussion. She was not convinced that regional history was well-rooted in the region or that we will have the strength of numbers to do in the future what we have done in the past. She was not certain that new appointments in regional history were going to be a goal in new hiring at the universities. Perhaps there was even some disdain towards the field, reminiscent of the 1950s? Would retirements of regional scholars at institutions outside the region also be replaced? Besides *Acadiensis*, whose future was no doubt assured, would smaller journals be able to survive? Where are we going in the 21st century? She concluded that she was more apprehensive than others in this respect.

DAVID PRITCHARD stated that there needs to be an effort by academics to reach out to those who are working in the field of popular history. If popular historians are off the mark, they need help. To the extent that academic historians can reach out, you are in a position to help make them more credible and more interesting. D.A. MUISE agreed and added that some academics were doing so. Some academics had prepared a proposal for a popular history of Nova Scotia, but the project was not awarded to them. He spoke as well of the need for promotion by publishers, and of our obligation to write for general audiences. E.R. FORBES added that there were some good recent examples of authors writing for both scholarly and popular audiences and identified the biography of J.B. McLachlan as a recent example.

JUDITH FINGARD pointed out that good amateur historians can do a better job than some writers, but that we also have to be willing to take on such jobs when they come along. She wondered how universities will regard studies that lack impenetrable prose and heavy footnotes. She added that in one recent legal history, the footnotes were published separately on a website. MARK SAVOIE agreed that there are popular histories done by professional historians using the findings of the *Acadiensis* tradition of research. Will the amateur historians take this work into account? D.A. MUISE said that we must assume this will happen, but added that he felt overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of publication in local and illustrated history. There was also the matter of what is happening on the world wide web, where there is lots of interesting material appearing. We have to figure out how to have a presence on the web of the sort that Jim Hiller and others have been doing for Newfoundland.

KEN DEWAR pointed out that this was not just a peculiarly regional question, but a general one. The scholarship associated with *Acadiensis* has grown and flowered as have similar traditions elsewhere. The audience for academic history in Canada has grown and we have been meeting the need, but now that academia is being constrained, we have to consider our relationship to the non-academic audience. Does the scholarly work show up in popular histories? People are interested in history and are visiting museums and yet not reading what we write. The common readership wants to read history, but what they seize on is often non-historians' work.

NAOMI GRIFFITHS noted that the type of history people want to read is not always the kind of history that scholars write. There is a tension between popular history and

what we generally do. We write complex works that do not have simple answers. Many of us are frightened of what writing for a popular audience might do to an academic career. Popular historians tend not to worry about the accuracy of their work. But in simplifying you do not have to falsify.

P.C. KENT recalled an expedition some years ago to present a copy of the new Acadiensis Press book, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, to Premier Frank McKenna of New Brunswick. Before doing so it was necessary to fix the error in this edition which gave the incorrect date of his election in 1987. DAVID FRANK added that following the photo-opportunity, Premier McKenna tried to return the book. He was invited to keep it and read it.