

## Approaching the Northeast from Several Directions: John G. Reid's *Essays on Northeastern North America*

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Approaching the Northeast from Several Directions:  
John G. Reid's *Essays on Northeastern North America*

NO ACTIVE HISTORIAN STUDYING THE 17th- AND 18th-CENTURY Maritime region has produced a richer or more varied body of scholarship than John G. Reid. *Essays on Northeastern North America: Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) is an introduction to his work. The volume contains some of his unpublished essays as well as articles that have previously appeared in print, and it spans his career from 1976 to 2004. Reid has revised some of the older pieces, but only slightly. It is remarkable how well even his work from the 1970s has stood the test of time. The collection is organized in a loosely chronological fashion. It opens with a section of three essays on early-17th-century colonization, and proceeds with groups of articles on imperialism in the late-17th and early-18th centuries and the persistence of Aboriginal power in the 18th century. The volume closes with three papers Reid delivered in 2004 during events marking the anniversary of the founding of Acadia. While this arrangement does not precisely track the progress of Reid's career, it is noticeable that two of his oldest essays appear in the first section and his most recent work is in the last two parts of the book. Thus the reader roughly follows the evolution of Reid's thinking over the years.

The first essay in the volume, "Sir William Alexander and North American Colonization," is typical of Reid's work in navigating the outer margins of historical knowledge. At the time of its composition in 1990, basic details of the timing of the foundation of Alexander's New Scotland colony had only recently come to light. Absorbing this information into his already rich understanding of New Scotland, Reid makes a strong case for the importance of the Scottish outpost despite its historiographic obscurity and short life. "While it lasted," he writes, "the Scottish settlement at Port Royal was just as successful as any other new colony in North America until 1629, and more so than most" (39). Reid reconsiders New Scotland in a 2004 essay that appears third in this collection, "The 'Lost Colony' of New Scotland and its Successors, to 1670." In this later piece he more forcefully advances an argument he had hinted at in his earlier essay: failure was the norm for colonization efforts in northeastern North America at least until 1670, and arguably for long thereafter. Establishing new, permanent, year-round settlements was a losing proposition for European investors and, as a result, colonies were "lost" one after another and each failure built on the ruins of its predecessors.

The second section of this book centers on the period between 1690 and 1720, a long era of Anglo-French tension and intermittent warfare punctuated by the 1710 conquest and Britain's formal acquisition of Nova Scotia under the terms of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. For most of the 20th century, historians debated the meaning of these events by concentrating on relations between the various colonial inhabitants of the Maritime region and the New Englanders. Reid's work breaks out of that frame of reference by emphasizing imperial influences and the persistent power of Aboriginal peoples. Equally importantly, he asks us to respect all the players in the stories he tells by considering events from several perspectives at once. This second section opens

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with an essay Reid wrote jointly with Emerson W. Baker on William Phips and his use of language, “‘The best Conditioned Gentleman in the World’? Verbal and Physical Abuse in the Behaviour of Sir William Phips.” Phips was born in present-day Maine and had spent a good part of his life at sea before commanding the New Englanders’ 1690 expedition against Port Royal. He later would serve as the first royal governor of Massachusetts. He could be vulgar, obscene, abusive, and threatening when speaking to crowds, but he was also entirely “proper” (to borrow Cotton Mather’s word) when he visited the court in London. Success in his world required him to speak in ways that appealed to different constituencies. He literally had to represent or embody different cultural traditions and political interests in order to secure and retain power. Ultimately, the challenge was too much for Phips. He was recalled to London for a variety of reasons, but mostly because he could not keep his North American persona secret.

The next essay in this section, “The Conquest of ‘Nova Scotia’: Cartographic Imperialism and the Echoes of a Scottish Past,” is similar to the previous one on Phips in that it analyzes the strategic use of language and the contrasting resonance of particular words on the opposite sides of the Atlantic. This essay traces the significance of the geographical label “Nova Scotia” from the demise of the original Scottish colony until 1720. During much of that period most New Englanders could pronounce the words “Nova Scotia” without ever even thinking of Scotland, but briefly, in the run-up to the 1710 campaign, Samuel Vetch and William Dudley emphasized the Scottish origins of the phrase in order to celebrate and exploit the union of Scotland and England and secure metropolitan support for a purported reconquest of the colony. In order to understand the effectiveness of the imperial promoters’ strategy, it is important to keep in mind that the ministers in London knew almost nothing about the Maritime region and that they were capable of taking action on the basis of misinformation and fantasy. And in “Imperialism, Diplomacies, and the Conquest of Port Royal, 1710,” Reid examines the oblivious presumptuousness of the European negotiators at Utrecht, who pretended to transfer large tracts of North American territory over which none of them had control. Their decisions created headaches for the early British administrators of Nova Scotia, who had to face reality and enter into a new round of negotiations with the Acadians, the Wulstukwiuk, and the Mi’kmaq.

Emerson W. Baker collaborated with Reid on two of the best essays in this collection, including the one that I see as pivotal – a 2004 article entitled “Amerindian Power in the Early Modern Northeast: A Reappraisal.” In that joint essay, which opens the book’s third section, Baker and Reid reconceptualize the area now known as the Maritime Provinces and northern New England as a single region. They argue that this zone, which they call northeastern North America, was dominated by Algonkians at the beginning of the 18th century except in a few geographically limited zones of colonial settlement. In a subsequent essay in the volume, “*Pax Britannica* or *Pax Indigena*? Planter Nova Scotia (1760-1782) and Competing Strategies of Pacification,” Reid takes this idea further, and suggests that the geopolitical pattern established in the 17th century may have persisted in Nova Scotia into the 1780s.

It is a gratifying consequence of the organization of this book – simultaneously moving forward in historical time while tracking the expansion of Reid’s thinking on

these topics – that the Aboriginal peoples of the region get more concentrated attention at the end of the volume than they do at the beginning. This, of course, reverses the pattern most common in historical surveys of the colonial era. Even today, Aboriginal peoples are often summarily discussed at the beginning of comprehensive colonial histories, and then gradually pushed to the sidelines. To be sure, the historical profession as a whole is changing its way of interpreting the process of colonization, and the shifts in Reid's focus reflect a wide historiographic trend. But Reid brings an unusual perspective to his work. According to his own account, his outlook was fundamentally altered by his service during the 1990s as an expert witness in the Mi'kmaw and Wulstukwiuk treaty rights case *Regina v. Donald Marshall Junior*. Since that time he has been acutely aware that the Aboriginal peoples of the Maritimes have present-day interests that they can pursue effectively, in part as a consequence of agreements their ancestors entered into during the 18th century. More generally, Reid has become ever more attentive of the quirks of historical contingency and wary of the contemporary implications of our efforts to impose a sense of inevitability on the events of the past. These are important themes in his last section of three essays: a piece playfully deploying counterfactual history, another evaluating the significance of Samuel de Champlain, and a third reflecting on the process of commemoration. All of these essays were originally talks inspired by the anniversary of an event – the establishment of a small, short-lived French post on a piece of land now called St. Croix Island – which, Reid argues, probably seems more momentous in retrospect that it did in 1604.

There is some repetition in the volume. To cite perhaps the most obvious example, the readers are introduced to Sir William Alexander – as if for the first time – in the three different chapters that discuss New Scotland. Such repetition was virtually inevitable, because all of the essays in the book remain free-standing pieces. An editorial process that eliminated repetition would have harmed the integrity of the individual contributions. Furthermore we can learn much by returning to the same fields of inquiry in the context of different narratives and arguments. Reid's and Baker's article on "Amerindian Power," for example, covers the period between 1675 and 1725, and it is placed next to an essay closely examining a treaty negotiated in 1717. This essay, entitled "The Sakamow's Discourtesy and the Governor's Anger: Negotiated Imperialism and the Arrowsic Conference, 1717," reiterates some of arguments advanced in the "Amerindian Power" piece but it does so within the context of a close analysis of one treaty negotiation. We get a much stronger sense of the political dynamics of the region as they were manifested in a single moment. The juxtaposition of the two essays is evocative.

Reid does not contradict himself in this volume. His interpretive frameworks change, but not in ways that invalidate his earlier perspectives. Consequently, the essays as a group support his overriding contention that northeastern North America contains many histories, which reflects the multiplicity of its inhabitants. Implicitly he suggests that no one could ever write a comprehensive narrative history of the region with a coherent plot line. Other historians contemporary to Reid have told grander single stories by maintaining a tighter focus and dedicating much of their careers to the history of a single community or people. Thus in several volumes A.J.B. Johnson has provided us with a compelling, intimate account of French Louisbourg while Naomi Griffiths has examined Acadian history both with an eye to detail and a

constant awareness of her story's vast chronological sweep.<sup>1</sup> Reid, by contrast, has repeatedly shifted his focus, at various times concentrating on Scots, New Englanders, Amerindians, diplomats, expeditionary leaders, and settlers. His is a body of work that will never be summed up neatly. Instead of providing us with a satisfying narrative coherence, he seems to have challenged us to pick up different strands in the stories he has told and pursue our own divergent investigations.

Of course this is not a final account of Reid's career. He remains an extremely active scholar, and even in this volume he flags lines of inquiry that he might pursue further. In his new introduction to the oldest essay in the book, his 1976 piece on "Environment and Colonization Styles in Early Acadia and Maine," Reid remarks on the value of his youthful "environmental reflections" (40). Over the intervening years he has concentrated much more on politics than on the mundane, physical realities of life in the Maritimes; but in his most recent essays, on Planter Nova Scotia and the legacies of 1604, he evinces a renewed interest in land use, environmental resources, economic competition, and ecological change. Reid should pursue these themes further, as it would be good to know more about the physical realities of daily life among the Algonkian peoples of northeastern North America in order to make a fuller assessment of the extent to which those nations retained their autonomy and power in the 18th century.

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1 Johnston's work on Louisbourg has culminated in *Endgame 1758: The Promise, the Glory, and the Despair of Louisbourg's Last Decade* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007). See also N.E.S. Griffiths, *From Migrant To Acadian: A North American Border People, 1604-1755* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).