

Sesquicentennial Cerebrations

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PRESENT AND PAST/PRÉSENT ET PASSÉ

Sesquicentennial Cerebrations

cerebration, *n.* the working of the brain; thinking.

REVIEWING SIX NEW BOOKS ON THE STATE OF THE NATION put Ramsay Cook in a combative mood during Canada's centennial year. And so he came out swinging in "Canada's Centennial Cerebrations," throwing the first punch in a carefully selected epigraph that in effect compared Canada's "academic nationalists" and their "contemplations of the Canadian navel" to Chairman Mao and his teachings: "The unity of our country, the unity of our people, and the unity of our various nationalities," Mao instructed, "are the basic guarantees of the sure triumph of our cause."¹ In Cook's defence, Canada's "National Liberation Frontists" could be insufferable and their appeals to national unity and the national cause, however defined, could be tiring. Besides, he had grown up on the Prairies and he understood that what was called nation-building in Ontario was really Ontario-building and that if the National Policy meant tariff protection for Ontario manufacturers it meant more expensive farm machinery for Prairie farmers. He also distrusted appeals to the unity of Canada's nationalities. The Prairies were a mosaic, he said, not a melting pot, and to suggest otherwise was wishful thinking.² Cook therefore urged historians to re-think their "frame of reference": "Instead of constantly deploring our lack of identity, we should attempt to understand and explain the regional, ethnic, and class identities that we do have. It might just be that in these limited identities that 'Canadianism' is found."³

In a second and less well-known paper, presented to the Royal Society a few months later, Cook picked up where he had left off. Nationalism was a political and intellectual dead end, he said, and the nation, used as a "central focus," had "distorted" Canadian historical writing in English and in French and "narrowed" our understanding of the past. Again, he urged historians to develop different categories of analysis, including region, ethnicity, and class in order to write "the social, intellectual, religious, economic, labour, and agricultural history of Canada." He also reminded his audience that "were it not for the anthropologists we should know almost nothing of the North American Indian": is it because, he asked, Indians "muddy the otherwise clear image we have of our nation, one and indivisible?"⁴

1 Ramsay Cook, "Canadian Centennial Cerebrations," *International Journal* 22, no. 4 (1967): 659, 660.

2 Ramsay Cook, "Frontier and Metropolis: The Canadian Experience," *XIII International Congress of Historical Sciences* (1970): 3. Thirty-five years later he wrote "Growing up in western Canada prepared me thoroughly for what became known as multiculturalism, the normal state of things in small towns and even large cities on the prairies." See Ramsay Cook, *Watching Quebec: Selected Essays* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), viii.

3 Cook, "Canada's Centennial Cerebrations," 663.

4 Ramsay Cook, "Canadian Historical Writing," in *Scholarship in Canada, 1967: Symposium Presented to Section II of the Royal Society of Canada in 1967*, ed. R.H. Hubbard (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), 80, 81.

Limited identities might have disappeared in the valley of the shadow of Canadian arts and letters had it not been for Maurice Careless. In a 1967 address to the American Historical Association, Careless offered his own celebrations. “Hung up on the plot of nation-building,” he said, Canadian historians have reduced Canadian history to a teleological morality tale: “There are the good guys and the bad, the unifying nation-builders and their foes.” Like Cook, he urged his colleagues to study Canada through region, ethnicity, and class, or through limited identities. After all, there were at least two Canadas, French Canada and English Canada, and French Canada was more than Quebec while English Canada included “several English Canadas.”⁵ In short, Canadian history was plural, not singular.

Although Cook later described “limited identities” as a phrase “tossed off” at the end of a review essay, it took on, with an “enormous boost” from Careless, “a life of its own.”⁶ Representing a powerful alternative to the Laurentian thesis, it provided a conceptual opening to the re-writing of Canadian history. For his part, Donald Creighton was not impressed. He had attended Careless’s address to the AHA but left feeling “very depressed.” Having dedicated his career to what he once called Canada’s “transcendent sense of nationhood,” he was now being told that the nation as a category of analysis had been misguided: “I am a very old fashioned nationalist who is completely out of tune with the present.”⁷

Limited identities soon included gender. In fact, Cook contributed an introduction to a new edition of *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* by Catherine Cleverdon, and he later co-edited with Wendy Mitchinson a collection of primary documents in women’s history. That Canadian historians had ignored women’s history did not surprise him: the profession, he noted, has been historically small and “dominated by men.”⁸

Ten years after the publication of “Canadian Centennial Celebrations,” Cook surveyed what he called “the Golden Age” of Canadian historical writing. Having rejected the nation as a frame of reference, a new generation of scholars were re-writing Canadian history, including Michael Katz, Nikki Strong-Boag, Carol Bacchi, Wendy Mitchinson, David Frank, and Greg Kealey. Although he worried that the reaction against “the old nationalist formulas” might itself “become stultifying and produce its own reaction,” Cook welcomed the re-writing of Canadian history: he understood that the genius of social history was the genius of exposing the lie that is any dream of nation and revealing the omissions that make possible any national narrative. Maybe, he wrote, Canada “is not made up of what I

5 Maurice Careless, “‘Limited Identities’ in Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 50, no. 1 (1969): 1-10.

6 Ramsay Cook, “Identities Are Not Like Hats,” *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (2000): 262.

7 Donald Creighton, Diary entry for 30 December 1967, Donald Creighton fonds, MG 31 D 77, vol. 65, file 6, Library and Archives Canada. For “transcendent sense of nationhood,” see Donald Creighton, *Dominion of the North* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1944), 423.

8 Ramsay Cook, “Introduction,” in Catherine Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), viii. See also Ramsay Cook and Wendy Mitchinson, eds., *The Proper Sphere: Woman’s Place in Canadian Society* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976). On Cook’s intellectual and moral support to her career, see Wendy Mitchinson, “No One Becomes a Feminist to Be Appreciated,” *Canadian Historical Review* 94, no. 3 (2013): 436-58.

once carelessly called ‘limited identities,’ but rather of unlimited identities.” And it “has been the competition and clash of those identities, regional, ethnic, class, and sexual, which gives our history its dynamic.”⁹

On one or two occasions, Cook attempted to disown “limited identities” – once joking that Maurice Careless was “welcome to it.”¹⁰ After all, “The phrase I had coined to challenge a musty orthodoxy threatened to become another received truth, a cliché, an atrophied centennial cerebration.” However, Cook did not recant “the conviction that lay behind the phrase”: Canadian history was plural, not singular, and it included “workers and farmers, museums and asylums, women and men, housemaids and prime ministerial table rapping, businessmen and bee keepers, west and east, environment, culture, and religion.” Indeed, “pleas for a return to so-called national history, especially when defined as political and diplomatic history,” left him “cold.” Still, he wondered, had he not “conceded victory to the enemy, ‘national identity’”?

In attempting to deconstruct “national identity,” I had allowed the possibility that other identities were inferior consolation prizes for citizens of a country too anemic to have nurtured a proper national identity.

Perhaps, he added, he should have described region, ethnicity, class, and gender as “equally valid identities.” But that was not quite right either. Taking his cue from British historian Linda Colley, who argued that identities are “not like hats” because we “can and do put on several at a time,” Cook now talked about multiple identities. Colley’s negative comparison of identities to hats is helpful but it still does not capture the complexity of identity: identities are not something that we put on and take off. Instead, they intersect one with the other, something Cook intuited, though he did not use intersection and he certainly did not use intersectionality: “Identities, neither limited nor unlimited, but rather multiple, relational, shifting, contingent: there is my millennium cerebration.”¹¹

Phillip Buckner reached the same conclusion in his millennium essay: limited identities had provided an important alternative to the nation-state as a frame of reference, but it had not accurately captured the complexity of identity: “The truth is that Canadians, like other peoples, hold multiple identities simultaneously” and “have always done so.” And those identities are “socially constructed,” “fluid,” “unstable,” and “frequently in a state of re-negotiation.”¹²

But Buckner objected to some of Cook’s remarks about region, including a 1983 assertion in *Acadiensis* that “as a tool of analysis, ‘regionalism’ is a concept whose time has gone.”¹³ What I think Cook meant is that, as a tool of analysis, untheorized

9 Ramsay Cook, “The Golden Age of Canadian Historical Writing,” *Historical Reflections* 4, no. 1 (1977): 137, 144, 139, 149.

10 Ramsay Cook, “Nation, Identity, Rights: Reflections on W.L. Morton’s *Canadian Identity*,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 29, no. 2 (1994): 12.

11 Cook, “Identities Are Not Like Hats,” 263, 262, 265.

12 Phillip Buckner, “‘Limited Identities’ Revisited: Regionalism and Nationalism in Canadian History,” *Acadiensis* XXX, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 12.

13 Quotation in Buckner, “‘Limited Identities’ Revisited,” 8.

regionalism was a concept whose time had passed.¹⁴ He worried that some scholars used regionalism too “freely”¹⁵ while other scholars assumed that “regionalism, however defined,” was “virtuous in the same fashion that nationalism once was.”¹⁶ Wanting intellectual rigour and definitional clarity is not the same thing as wanting to throw the baby out with the bath water, especially since Cook consistently supported the writing of regional history: east and west, north and south, Ontario and Quebec. For example, he did not ignore *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, an enormous intellectual endeavour and enduring milestone in Canadian historical writing.¹⁷ He actually read the thing. “The distinctive quality of life in the Atlantic region remains and emerges subtly from the pages of this rich new study,” he wrote. “It lies, at least in part, in that repeated shift from optimism, innocent or otherwise, to skepticism, fatalistic or otherwise, that characterizes so much of the history of the region.”¹⁸

2017 marks Canada’s sesquicentennial. Promising fireworks, parades, and free events as well as patriotic speeches by national politicians and local notables, every one tripping over every one else to proclaim their pride of nation and love of country, Ottawa is throwing a \$500 million dollar party: Canada 150.¹⁹ When launched by the Conservative government with an initial price tag of \$150 million, Liberal MPs called it a “slush fund.” Apparently tossing in an additional \$350 million makes it a wise investment in Canada and in Canadians.²⁰ Either way, Canada 150 is ultimately a massive branding exercise, which should make historians nervous. As Rebecca Solnit argues in a brilliant essay on public memory, “Branding is the relentless pursuit of a single identity, a single story; it opposes the multiplicity and strife that inevitably characterize any effort of collective memory.”²¹ Historians in New Brunswick should be doubly nervous. For its Canada 150 slogan, the provincial government selected “Celebrate Where It All Began,” riffing on Donald Creighton’s opening sentence to *The Road to Confederation*: “It was the enthusiasm of Gordon of New Brunswick that gave the movement its real start.”²² As far as

14 See Ramsay Cook, “Reconstructing the Canadian Past,” *Associazione Italiana di Studi Canadesi*, Canada: Ieri e Oggi, *Cultura Straniera* 43 (1990): 38–40.

15 Cook, “Golden Age of Canadian Historical Writing,” 140.

16 Ramsay Cook, “Regionalism Unmasked,” *Acadiensis* XIII, no. 1 (Autumn 1983): 138. On region in Canadian historical writing, see Gerald Friesen, “The Evolving Meanings of Region in Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (2001): 529–45.

17 E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Fredericton and Toronto: Acadiensis Press and University of Toronto Press, 1993).

18 Ramsay Cook, “The New History of Atlantic Canada,” *Acadiensis*, XXIII, no. 1 (Autumn 1993): 152.

19 Not everyone is celebrating. See Robert Everett-Green, “Kent Monkman: Trickster with a Cause Crashes Canada 150 Party,” *Globe and Mail*, 7 January 2017.

20 “Ottawa Spending Half a Billion Dollars for Canada’s 150th Anniversary,” *Globe and Mail*, 4 January 2017.

21 Rebecca Solnit, “Monument Wars,” *Harper’s Magazine*, January 2017, 13.

22 Gordon of New Brunswick was Arthur Hamilton Gordon, lieutenant governor of New Brunswick, 1861–1866. See Donald Creighton, *The Road to Confederation: The Emergence of Canada, 1863–1867* (1964; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1. Creighton may have led with New Brunswick, but he quickly described it as a “dreary, unenterprising, poverty-stricken place”; see *Road to Confederation*, 5.

tourism campaigns go, they have been “hung on less.”²³ But had the Department of Tourism, Heritage, and Culture read less Donald Creighton and more Ernie Forbes and Del Muise, it might have selected a slogan that captured the multiplicity and strife of New Brunswick’s past and present: “Optimism, Skepticism, Hope, and Despair: Bienvenue au Nouveau Brunswick.”

Still, Canada’s sesquicentennial offers a convenient, if contrived, opportunity to take stock, or to cerebrate. To this end, the editors of *Acadiensis* have invited six historians to write an essay using 2017 as an occasion to assess Atlantic Canadian history and the writing of Atlantic Canadian history. The first three are published in this issue.

Surveying large questions of history, memory, people, and place, David Lowenthal reminds us that Newfoundland is a nation, a province, and an idea where historical consciousness, nostalgia, invented traditions, real grievances, conspiracy theories, and exceptionalism were forged over several hundred years. In effect, he reminds us that Atlantic Canada is itself an unstable term because Newfoundland is a different and, to use Ramsay Cook’s word, sometimes “ornery” place that defies regional timelines and generalizations.²⁴ “Whether crutch or curse, the past is Newfoundlanders’ unshakeable intimate companion,” writes Lowenthal. Novelist Wayne Johnston would agree. Using D.W. Prowse’s 1895 *History of Newfoundland* as a plot device in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, he gave the past a comedic, tragic, and unshakeable presence across the stretch of his epic novel. But Lowenthal’s conclusion that Newfoundland is the “unloved stepsister,” her “toes cut off to squeeze crippled feet into the merciless slipper of Confederation,” is more suggestive than it is settled. Still, he is right about one thing: the “Newfoundland question” in the rest of Canada is the “Canadian question” in Newfoundland, history being a matter of where you stand. An island is not “a place set apart,” Wayne Johnston wrote. “An island, until you leave it, is the world.”²⁵

Atlantic Canada, in a way, is a set of four islands, each one its own world with its own history – a point confirmed by Heidi MacDonald. Examining the writing of the history of suffrage in Atlantic Canada, she notes how problematic and unhelpful the metaphor of waves is to writing women’s history and insists that while the suffrage movement unfolded in national and transnational contexts, it was “fundamentally” local. In other words, place matters to history and to the writing of history. Indeed, she argues that the suffrage movement is better conceived as the suffrage movements in the Dominion of Newfoundland and the three Maritime provinces. Opposition, too, was local, although it was strongest in Newfoundland. Demonstrating its familiarity with Lady Macbeth’s famous soliloquy – where she calls upon the spirits to “unsex me here / And fill me from crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty” (*Macbeth*, Act 1, scene 5) – the *Evening Telegram* expressed its lack “of sympathy or encouragement for those ladies who would voluntarily unsex

23 Edward MacDonald, quoted in “Began . . . In This Place? Confusion over Province’s Canada 150 Slogan,” CBC News, 5 January 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/canada-150-slogan-new-brunswick-1.3921025>.

24 Cook, “New History of Atlantic Canada,” 148.

25 Wayne Johnston, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (Toronto: Alfred Knopf, 1998); Wayne Johnston, *Baltimore’s Mansion* (Toronto: Vintage, 2000), 120.

themselves.”²⁶ Actually, MacDonald’s insistence that the suffrage movement was provincial and not regional echoes something Cook once observed: sometimes we use region when really we mean province.²⁷

For many years, from 1989 to 2007, Cook served as the general editor of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. Although a lot of work, it stemmed from a deep commitment to ordinary men and women who did extraordinary things, from late-19th-century beekeepers who challenged religious orthodoxy to early-20th-century feminists who challenged male prerogative.²⁸ Indeed, I think he would have very much enjoyed “meeting” James Barry, the subject of Danny Samson’s paper. A miller, printer, fiddler, reader, diarist, iconoclast, and Presbyterian, Barry had interesting things to say about Nova Scotia, Confederation and religion. “Tomorrow we will be swallowed up in the Dominion of Canada,” he wrote on 30 June 1867. And “Nova Scotia will become a province of Canada and Canadians will rule and suck the life blood out of it.” Clearly not everyone was in a festive mood 150 years ago. Nova Scotia’s many opponents of Confederation had different reasons for opposing a wider union of British North America, but Samson provides a fascinating glimpse into their motivations – one in particular: religion, specifically Scottish Presbyterianism. Mining Barry’s diary, he locates “a rich historical vein of dissenting church opposition to imposition by larger historical forces.” And although Barry never really left Pictou County – the furthest he travelled was 20 miles west to Truro – he “was an avid participant in the trans-Atlantic world of letters” through the many books he read and the ideas he debated. Barry’s opposition to Confederation was not “parochial,” “suspicious,” and “jealous,” to use Donald Creighton’s pejoratives. Nor was it “hard,” “mutinous,” and “fanatical.”²⁹ Rather, it was “thoughtful, careful, and considered, and it drew on decades of popular dissenting Presbyterian responses to the political and intellectual impositions of powerful state churches.” Samson’s focus on a single individual is a reminder of history’s intimacy. Yet Barry was not always likable: he could be angry, narcissistic, and violent. But as an example of the multiplicity and strife of 1867, he offers a corrective to the official simplicity and imagined unity of 2017.

Read together, the essays by David Lowenthal, Heidi MacDonald, and Danny Samson provide historical context to Canada 150 celebrations, which often take place in a kind of historical vacuum. To kick off Canada 150, Fredericton hosted a free party for adults and kids on New Year’s Eve. To celebrate their first New Year’s Eve in their new country, I took my adopted Syrian family. Watching Arabic-speaking children play with Canada 150 swag made in China reminded me yet again that New Brunswick, like Canada, is plural and global and always has been, in this instance, connected to the world through the capillaries of the refugee system and

26 Lillian Bouzane et al., “The Triumphs and Tribulations of the Early Suffragettes and Others, or Go Home and Bake Bread,” 1982, Centre for Newfoundland Studies, St. Johns.

27 Cook, “Regionalism Unmasked,” 140-1.

28 Ramsay Cook, “Pringle, William Allen,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 12 (University of Toronto/Université Laval, 1990); Ramsay Cook and Michèle Lacombe, “Merrill, Flora MacDonald (Denison),” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 15 (University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2005).

29 Creighton, *Road to Confederation*, 12, 34, 105, 356, 242, 342.

through supply chains linking Chinese sweatshops to local landfills. Maybe that could be the opening hook to my sesquicentennial cerebration, I thought: “New Brunswick: A History of the World.” Then I re-read an unpublished essay by Ramsay Cook, “Who Broadened Canadian History?” Dismissing as silly the notion that Canadian history had been killed by social historians, he proceeded to chart the many ways it had been broadened. And he invited historians to “expand” their horizons still further by studying Canada’s limited, unlimited, and multiple identities in their transnational contexts.³⁰ As always, he beat me to the punch. In a way, though, *Acadiensis* beat us both: for nearly half a century it has provided a site for the re-thinking and the re-writing of the history of the Atlantic region, defined to include everyone and everything and conceived to include the wider Atlantic World. Welcoming readers to the inaugural issue, Phillip Buckner proclaimed that, in *Acadiensis*, “History will be defined in its broadest sense.”³¹ Every graduate student should be required to commit that to memory.

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30 Ramsay Cook, “Who Broadened Canadian History?” H. Sanford Riley Lecture, University of Winnipeg, 19 October 2009, copy in possession of author.

31 Phillip Buckner, “*Acadiensis* II,” *Acadiensis* I, no. 1 (Autumn 1971): 9.