

Introduction
Atlantic Canada: A Region in the Making

Margaret R. Conrad and James K. Hiller

A joke circulating in Atlantic Canada runs something like this: Following a car accident on the 401 highway, a Toronto businessman dies and goes to heaven. He's relieved, because as he lay on his deathbed he was anything but certain that he would make the final cut. At the heavenly gates he is met by St Peter, who offers to take him on a guided tour of the divine estate. Beatific smiles on the faces of the people they meet indicate widespread contentment, except for one group who are chained to a pole and clearly displeased with their eternal condition. 'Why are these people shackled?' he asks. 'And why are they so unhappy?' 'Oh, they're from Atlantic Canada,' St Peter replies. 'If we didn't restrain them, they would try to go back home.'

This joke, carefully contrived to define Atlantic Canada with reference to Toronto, nicely sums up one contrasting pair of regional identities in contemporary Canada. It also speaks to the deep sense of place that sets Atlantic Canadians apart from many other North Americans. Although there are formal criteria relating to geography, history, and economic condition that may be used to define Atlantic Canada, it is above all the region's functional relation to the rest of the continent that now fixes its identity. This was not always the case. Nor has the region always been treated as a single geo-political unit. In the nineteenth century, the Maritimes – Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island – were quite distinct from Newfoundland and Labrador. Their distinctiveness manifested itself in differing responses to Confederation. While the Maritime colonies, with varying degrees of reluctance, all became provinces of Canada between 1867 and 1873, Newfoundland and Labrador resisted the modern continental drift until the 1940s. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that 'Atlantic Canada' became the convenient shorthand term referring to all four of Canada's easternmost provinces.

Despite its common usage, the phrase 'Atlantic Canada' still sits awkwardly with many scholars, who have trouble imagining such a community. Alan Wilson concludes that, apart from fog and underdevelopment, the Maritimes share very little with Newfoundland.¹ In a recent two-volume history of the Atlantic region, Newfoundland and Labrador are an integral part of the pre-1867 volume, but largely absent from the second volume until 1949 – as if they had been expelled from the regional fold for their failure, however brief, to conform to their predetermined political destiny.² Literary scholars are similarly confounded by the Cabot Strait, with the result that two

¹Alan Wilson, 'Crosscurrents in Maritime Regionalism', in Bruce Hodgins et al., *Federalism in Canada and Australia: Historical Perspectives, 1920-1988* (Peterborough: Frost Centre for Canadian Heritage and Development Studies, 1989), 366.

²Phillip A. Buckner and John G. Reid, eds, *The Atlantic Region to Confederation: A History* (Toronto and Fredericton: University of Toronto Press and Acadiensis Press, 1994); E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto and Fredericton: University of Toronto Press and Acadiensis Press, 1993).

studies – Patrick O’Flaherty’s *The Rock Observed* and Janice Kulyk Keefer’s *Under Eastern Eyes* – are required to convey developments in Newfoundland and the Maritimes respectively. Taking a political perspective, J. Murray Beck in the late 1970s could find no regional identity at all – only provincial ones.³ Others have gone even further, to claim identity primarily in Atlantic Canada’s own untidy regionalisms. Mi’kma’ki, Acadie, Africadia, Cape Breton, and Labrador are only the most obvious examples of the regions that exist within, across, and beyond provincial boundaries.

In this volume we work with the current political definition of Atlantic Canada – the sometimes controversial, often artificial boundaries marked on a map – but we do not argue for a quintessential Atlantic Canadian regionalism. Instead we chart formal and functional regional identities and take into account the imagined sense of place that has evolved over time among a diverse people. In the documentary evidence left behind by shamans and tourist promoters, poets and photographers, novelists and number-crunchers, it is possible to catch glimpses of ‘regions of the mind’ in Atlantic Canada that have often had a greater impact on human motivation than more tangible political and economic structures.

Those regions of the mind offer a curiously contradictory picture of the Atlantic Canada. As Janice Kulyk Keefer reminds us, one lens frames ‘white clapboard church in scarlet autumn dale, dories in the very shape of indolence nesting in placid harbours, the subtle rot of grey-shingled shacks in dense spruce groves’; another captures ‘senile, ruined faces, large families in two-roomed shacks.’⁴ Bards, both ancient and modern, have often emphasized the Arcadian quality of the Atlantic landscape, while flint-eyed critics such as Patrick O’Flaherty have reflected on a brutal geographical legacy that in Newfoundland makes it impossible for ‘one generation to tame the environment for the benefit of the next.’⁵ O’Flaherty’s comment may be less applicable to the Maritimes, where the landscape has been more receptive to human industry, but it touches on a problem that pollsters suggest is endemic in the region: a low sense of efficacy. Atlantic Canadians, past and present alike, have combined regional pride and relentless optimism with a Sisyphean resignation to the idea that it may well be their lot to struggle rather than to arrive.

‘To be a scholar of Atlantic Canada,’ Ian McKay has observed, ‘is to wrestle, often at the very outset of one’s inquiries, with a subtle, pervasive and durable language of disparagement and

³J. Murray Beck, ‘An Atlantic Region Political Culture: A Chimera’, in David Jay Bercuson and Phillip A. Buckner, eds, *Eastern and Western Perspectives: Papers from the Joint Atlantic Canada/Western Canadian Studies Conference* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 147-68.

⁴Janice Kulyk Keefer, *Under Eastern Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 10.

⁵Patrick O’Flaherty, *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 100.

marginality.⁶ Even the region's history, as it has been interpreted in the twentieth century, may have helped to sell the region at a discount. In his provocative book *The Quest of the Folk*, McKay traces the processes by which in the difficult inter-war years (1919-39) Nova Scotians succumbed to the myth of a golden age when innocent fisherfolk lived in harmony with an idyllic rural landscape. Romanticized notions of pre-industrial utopias have been common enough in Western societies, McKay argues, but they have proved particularly pernicious in Nova Scotia, and by implication in all of Atlantic Canada, reducing real people to static essences represented by stereotypical figures: Glooscap, Loyalist Pioneers, Rugged Fishermen, Scottish Bagpipers. In Newfoundland, celebrations of outpost life have been dangerously combined with a long-standing sense of victimization, with a parade of historical scapegoats – from the fishing admirals to Water Street merchants – used to explain relative backwardness and failure. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, fictional characters – Evangeline, Anne of Green Gables, La Sagouine – seem to loom larger on the region's historical landscape than more complex realities do.

When they venture outside their natural habitat, Atlantic Canadians often find that their 'folk' images work against them, the first impression being that they are quaint rustics in a modern world of sophisticated go-getters. David Weale notes that some people from Prince Edward Island still take a perverse pleasure in boasting that they have never been to 'the other side', by which they mean 'the mainland'.⁷ At the same time, it seems, nothing so becomes the Atlantic region as the leaving of it. Writing in 1912 from Leaskdale, Ontario, the popular writer L.M. Montgomery conceded that her new home was 'a very pretty country place – would be almost as pretty as Cavendish if it had the sea. . . . At times – generally in the winter twilight – I am very homesick and feel as if I would exchange all the kingdoms of the world and the glory thereof for a sunset ramble in Lover's Lane.'⁸

Gary Burrill argues that the idea of leaving home is inseparable from the Atlantic regional identity. As the 'light infantry of capital', Atlantic Canadians have sailed the oceans of the world and crisscrossed the continent in search of work and greener pastures. Both Prince Edward Island ('Prince Edward Island Adieu') and Nova Scotia ('Farewell to Nova Scotia') have inspired 'leaving' songs that are now canonized in folklore. The 'Ode to Newfoundland' is sung with as much enthusiasm in the taverns of Toronto and Edmonton as in the province that so many of its sons and daughters have been forced to leave. Such evidence of social cohesion notwithstanding, Atlantic Canadians have generally been quick to assimilate to other North American cultures and have left little permanent record of a distinctive legacy from a beloved

⁶Ian McKay, 'Of Karl Marx and the Bluenose: Colin Campbell McKay and the Legacy of Maritime Socialism', *Acadiensis* XXVII, 2 (Spring 1998), 3.

⁷David Weale, 'The Other Side', *Them Times* (Charlottetown: Institute of Island Studies, 1992), 5-7.

⁸Francis Bolger and Elizabeth R. Epperly, eds, *My Dear Mr. M: Letters to G.B. MacMillan from L.M. Montgomery* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1980), 65.

homeland. This should come as no surprise. Despite their nostalgia for the 'home place', Atlantic Canadians have a great deal in common with their North American neighbours.

Identities are not inbred; they are learned. Moreover, they vary over time and are usually constrained by cultural factors. In a study of identity formation in Cape Breton in the 1970s, Stephen Ullman discovered that pride in Cape Breton (as opposed to pride in Nova Scotia or Canada) increased with age, was stronger among Mi'kmaq than Euro-Canadians, and was also more pronounced among the working than the middle class.⁹ Had he included gender among his variables, it is likely that, given their socialization to separate spheres, women and men too would have revealed differing levels of regional awareness. Marilyn Porter's work on outport Newfoundland suggests that family and community concerns among women may well have a bearing on the findings of many quantitative studies purporting to measure regional or provincial traits.¹⁰

The foregoing suggests that 'region' and 'regionalism' are slippery concepts, ones that should be understood as reflecting shifting cultural and historical contexts rather than fixed and static 'truths'. The two terms also need to be distinguished. While the Atlantic 'region' can be easily found on a map, 'regionalism' implies a political stance, a consciousness of a shared outlook that can be summoned up when other structures – familial, communal, provincial, national, global – fail. Such a regionalism may manifest itself as friendliness in distant ports, but so far it has not been the stuff of political cohesion at home. Over the years, calls for union of the Maritime or Atlantic provinces have been voiced by policy-makers desperate to find a quick fix for real or imagined ills. That no such union has ever materialized suggests not only that there are other powerful identities in Atlantic Canada competing for dominance, but also that regionalism has limited value as a vehicle for common action.

Although Atlantic Canadians have so far rejected political union, they have increasingly come to share an angle of vision on the world they inhabit. This common perspective derives in large measure from the fact that, compared to the rest of Canada, the Atlantic region is both economically poor and politically weak. Indeed, the sociologist Wallace Clement has gone so far as to argue that in Canada all regionalisms are largely geographical expressions of more deeply rooted inequalities in the nation as a whole.¹¹ Relative poverty and political impotence are not unique to Atlantic Canada; until recently, much of Canada was a hinterland of the

⁹Stephen H. Ullman, 'Nationalism and Regionalism in the Political Socialization of Cape Breton Whites and Indians', *The American Review of Canadian Studies* 5, 1 (Spring 1975), 66-97.

¹⁰Marilyn Porter, *Place and Persistence in the Lives of Newfoundland Women* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1993).

¹¹Wallace Clement, 'A Political Economy of Regionalism in Canada', in Daniel Glenday, Hubert Guindon, and Allan Turowetz, eds, *Modernization and the Canadian State* (Toronto: Macmillan 1978), 89-110.

golden triangle framing Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa. Only in the second half of the twentieth century has a common experience with Canadian federalism served as a force for unity in the Atlantic region.

It might well be asked why 2.3 million people inhabiting a resource-rich area that is larger than most of the world's nation-states are not wallowing in wealth. Small countries off the edges of continents-among them Great Britain, Japan, even Iceland – have proven that economic success is possible without vast hinterlands or favoured climates. In the past, much of the responsibility for the region's economic plight has been laid at the feet of Atlantic Canadians themselves. Perhaps the first to so assign the blame was the Nova Scotia judge Thomas Chandler Haliburton, who, through his fictional character Sam Slick, commented in the 1830s that 'these Bluenoses have no motion in 'em, no enterprise, no spirit, and if any critter shows any symptoms of activity, they say he is a man of no judgment, he's speculative, he's a schemer, in short, he's mad.'¹² Haliburton's view has often been echoed, most recently by neo-liberal theorists eager to abandon regional development programs.

Given the industry displayed by Atlantic Canadians at home and abroad, it is difficult to put much stock in the notion that laziness is the cause of the region's economic difficulties. One might just as convincingly blame capitalist exploitation, federal policies, resource endowment, or acts of God. More useful is a conclusion reached by economist Donald Savoie: that community life in Atlantic Canada is richer than modern statistical analyses, based on narrow notions of economic well-being, suggest.¹³ It is, after all, a moot point whether wage-earners forced to spend most of their annual income on survival in more favoured regions of the continent are any better off than their counterparts in the Atlantic region, where the scale of living is smaller but may be equally rich in material and psychological well-being. Before his death in 1980, David Alexander, who perhaps contributed more to the understanding of his adopted region than any scholar of his generation, suggested that 'a new notion of happiness' based on the idea of regional self-reliance was emerging.¹⁴ This suggestion has yet to be fully realized, but the rising tide of globalism may well advance the process of regionalization more rapidly than even he could have imagined.

What exactly is Atlantic Canada? A shared location is obviously the cornerstone of any region, but even geography is an uncertain ally in the quest for definition. Consisting of islands, peninsulas, and fringes of the North American continent, the Atlantic region is not defined solely by its exposure to the North Atlantic; if it were, the Magdalen Islands, St Pierre and Miquelon, and the Gaspé would all be integral parts of it. Geographic diversity rather than homogeneity is

¹²Thomas C. Haliburton, *The Clockmaker* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1958), 50.

¹³Donald Savoie, *Regional Economic Development: Canada's Search for Solutions* (2nd edn Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 233-8.

¹⁴David Alexander, 'New Notions of Happiness: Nationalism Regionalism, and Atlantic Canada', *Journal of Canadian Studies* 15, 2 (Summer 1980), 29-42.

the region's most obvious feature. Extending over 17 degrees of both longitude and latitude, Atlantic Canada contains 539,101 square kilometres of land and fresh water, and 16,000 kilometres of saltwater shoreline. Mount Caubvick in Labrador's Torngat Mountains is the region's highest point, at 1,652 metres, while no part of Prince Edward Island rises above 142 metres. In western Newfoundland, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, the Appalachian range dominates the landscape. These mountains are so old that they have been eroded into stumps, the highest of which is Mount Carleton in New Brunswick (820 metres). In Cape Breton and Newfoundland the Appalachians rise steeply from the sea, helping to make the Cabot Trail and Gros Morne National Park two of the most spectacular tourist attractions in the world. Several millennia ago, the Atlantic region was much larger than it is today, and its ancient contours can be seen in the rough outlines of the continental shelf. The relative shallowness of the shelf has, until recently, provided a rich habitat for fish, and still makes it possible to extract undersea deposits of oil and natural gas.

Climate also ranges widely in the region, from the subarctic conditions of northern Labrador to the temperate ranges of southwestern Nova Scotia. Although weather is influenced primarily by continental systems moving eastwards, these are modified by the ocean, which gives Atlantic Canada warmer winters and cooler summers than areas of North America in the same latitudes farther west. Most of the region lacks the warming influence of the Gulf Stream that keeps Great Britain pleasantly mild compared to Newfoundland and Labrador, though the two regions are in roughly the same latitude. When the Gulf Stream meets the cold Labrador Current carrying ice from the north, it produces the fog for which the Grand Banks are infamous. The humourist Ray Guy imagined that a Newfoundland angel would miss 'a bit of fog' while strolling along the Celestial Landwash.¹⁵

Labrador makes up 54 per cent of the total land mass of the Atlantic region, but its rugged landscape, which is part of the Canadian Shield, has never supported a large population. By contrast, the rich soils of Prince Edward Island, and the valleys of the St John and Annapolis-Cornwallis rivers yield agricultural crops in modest abundance. Most of the region sustains a forest cover, much of it a mix of deciduous and coniferous trees. Over the past 500 years, the forests have been so thoroughly exploited that few old-growth stands are left. By contrast, the mineral wealth of the region, with the exception of the coal deposits of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and the iron deposits of Labrador, has yet to be fully exploited.

Fish, timber, minerals, and agricultural land provided immigrants with the material conditions for a degree of economic well-being and cultural commonality. Yet instead they nurtured dependency and diversity. With no internal metropolitan centre to impose a homogenizing influence, Atlantic Canada has historically been loose-jointed and vulnerable to outside forces. In the eighteenth century the region became the site of a struggle between France and Great Britain (and their satellites on the St Lawrence and in New England) for imperial domination. The losers in this contest were the Native peoples and the Acadians – the region's first

¹⁵Ray Guy, 'A Christmas Story', in Eric Norman, ed, *That Far Greater Bay* (St John's: Breakwater Books, 1976), 101.

European settlers – who were marginalized and saw most of their lands taken over by immigrants from Europe and the Thirteen Colonies/United States, who settled in the Maritimes between 1713 and 1867.

By the time of Confederation, more than 90 per cent of Atlantic Canadians could trace their origins to France or Great Britain (a proportion that still holds), and more than 80 per cent were native-born (the figure is much higher today). Except in Labrador, boundaries were also firmly in place by 1867, having been drawn well before the provinces in the rest of Canada took their final form. Rooted in the land and shaped by the sea before the Industrial Revolution had its way with them, Atlantic Canadians developed a sense of place more reminiscent of time-bound European nations than the frontier-driven empires of North America.

Provincialism and social rootedness had become defining features of Atlantic Canada by the middle of the nineteenth century. By that time too, according to some pundits, the region had begun to exhibit signs of a debilitating conservatism that made it resistant to progressive change. The historian E.R. Forbes and others have challenged the use of 'conservatism' to describe developments in the region, not so much because it is inaccurate as because it is inadequately explored. If Atlantic Canadians are more conservative than other North Americans, how does their conservatism manifest itself? Scholars who would confirm the conservative stereotype point to the comparative reluctance of Atlantic Canadians to support radical political movements, the tendency of the region's artists and creative writers to cling to realism, and a commitment to the notion of 'social good' in law and social policy. Scholars who dispute this view draw attention to the region's leadership in the movement for responsible government, its early commitment to higher education for women, pitched battles between capital and labour in mining and steel-making communities, and the outrageously radical efforts of the region's governments, in the second half of the twentieth century, to impose modernization through wholesale resettlement programs, sweeping municipal reform, and state-run enterprise. For our part, we contend that emphasizing radical departures serves the region no better than belabouring the conservative ones. The wiser course is to concede that Atlantic Canada is a complex region with a history long and deep enough to accommodate most academic prejudices. What we can say with certainty is that in recent years formal, functional, and imagined Atlantic regions have coincided more completely than ever before in recorded history. That coincidence is the basis on which this volume is predicated. Indeed, in lumping the four Atlantic provinces together in one volume – the four westernmost provinces are treated in two – Oxford University Press is helping to promote the idea of a cohesive region where, arguably, one does not exist.

History is a subjective enterprise, and what follows is only one way of 'seeing' Atlantic Canada. Our task has been made easier because one of the manifestations of a new sense of regional awareness in recent years has been an outpouring of historical literature. A focus and stimulus for a growing interest in regional history has been provided by the academic journal *Acadiensis*, founded in 1971, and the related conferences that began occurring on a regular basis in 1974. Since then, articles and books have appeared at such a rate that it is difficult to keep up with the field. *The Nova Scotia Historical Review*, *The Newfoundland Quarterly*, *Newfoundland and*

Labrador Studies, *Them Days*, *The Island Magazine*, *Les Cahiers de la Société historique acadienne*, and *The Cape Breton Magazine* have joined *Acadiensis* in exploring aspects of the region's past. So too have the historians based outside the university who have added immeasurably to our knowledge, and the archivists who have collected the documents and images that make our work possible. Thus, while we have selected what we consider relevant to our narrative, this book is indebted to the work of colleagues who, like ourselves, have been caught up in developing a better historical understanding of a region in the making.

From: Conrad, Margaret R. and James K. Hiller. "Introduction." In *Atlantic Canada: A Region in the Making*, 1-11. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001.