

## London Journal of Canadian Studies

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### The Political, Environmental and Cultural Economy of Heritage in Atlantic Canada: Studies in Regeneration

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# Introduction

*Edward MacDonald, John G. Reid  
and Robert Summerby-Murray\**

This and the following issue of the *London Journal of Canadian Studies* (Volumes 30 and 31) represent two parts of a single project.<sup>1</sup> The collection as a whole is all about resilience. Canada's Maritime Provinces have faced many challenges within Confederation, most obviously economic but also political, environmental and cultural. Since 1949, when Newfoundland and Labrador became part of Canada, Atlantic Canada as a whole has continued to encounter serious obstacles, even though in recent decades the proceeds of offshore oil have created in Newfoundland and Labrador a contrast between prosperous St. John's and other less affluent areas. To make matters worse, as Ernest R. Forbes pointed out many years ago, the region has also had to contend with being the butt of demeaning stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> Why should Canadian taxpayers prop up sleepy Atlantic communities that cannot or will not help themselves? Why are Atlantic Canadians too lethargic to take action to better themselves, preferring to take the hand-outs that keep them as the grasping but perennially poor relations of more dynamic compatriots in central Canada and the west? In reality, such critiques are unfair, self-serving and offensive. There are reasons for the adverse conditions under which the Atlantic provinces have historically too often laboured. In the context of the federation, as Richard Starr has recently argued, the Atlantic Canadian experience gives cause for concern as to whether the most basic principle of equal citizenship has been maintained in Canada.<sup>3</sup>

What has never wavered, however, is the level of hardiness and creativity with which adversity has been met. At the level of individuals and families, it has frequently been expressed in outmigration. Initially, during the late nineteenth century, the destination was most often

New England. Later waves of migrants went to southern Ontario and most recently to the energy and other resource fields of the western provinces. Sometimes the outmigrants have moved permanently, and sometimes – especially in the era of air travel – they have commuted a few weeks at a time in an effort to maintain a home and family life in Atlantic Canada. For all, the effort has been strenuous and often costly, and has represented a degree of sacrifice that the critics for the most part would never have been called upon to contemplate.

The essays in these journal issues consider another expression of resilience: the drive to rural, urban and economic regeneration through heritage. Heritage is a debatable and contested concept. By those who choose to see an awareness of heritage as essentially stagnant and backward-looking, this may be perceived as yet another expression of sloth and lethargy, or at best as a stubborn adherence to the characteristics of a world gone by. Certainly, as Ian McKay and Robin Bates among others have pointed out, there have been times when the Atlantic provinces themselves have marketed the region for tourist purposes as a land that time forgot.<sup>4</sup> The contributors to this collection, however, examine the concept and the practice of heritage from a different perspective. Both historically and in more contemporary contexts, these studies consider heritage as a facet of regeneration: economic, environmental, and cultural. The discriminating employment of heritage as an economic resource thus becomes much more than a tale of reflex, romantic nostalgia for what once was, but instead a dynamic conversation between present and past. It involves deliberate choices, based on perception and present need, about what stories to tell and the manner of their telling. In the process, communities' lived experience is recast for new purposes in the making of new economies.

The project that led towards the writing of all of these original essays began life as a conference at the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea, sponsored by the Canadian Studies in Wales Group and organised by Michael Williams, Graham Humphrys and Huw Bowen. The original event had a Welsh as well as an Atlantic Canadian focus, although the present collection brings together only the contributions that deal primarily with Atlantic Canada. The opening theoretical analysis by Williams and Humphrys, however, offers a reminder that the issues considered here do not have an exclusively regional significance but rather are of wide significance and are reflected in a sophisticated international literature. Accurately characterising regeneration as 'an attractively positive concept', the authors reflect on the scale of heritage values ranging from the universal to the national and regional, and they

effectively problematise the extent to which ‘heritage and identity – in all of their pluralistic forms – [do or should] shape regeneration plans and achievements’.

The first group of four essays links heritage and regeneration in historical contexts of economic dislocation. Rainer Baehre focuses on two communities on the west coast of Newfoundland, one a traditionally fishery-based island community that fell into decline during the twentieth century and was caught up in the resettlement policies of the province’s government, and the other a now-demolished community that once formed a multi-ethnic neighbourhood of Corner Brook. Both, for Baehre, offer possibilities for heritage revitalisation that can not only enhance the cultural health of this portion of Newfoundland but also foster a modest but significant tourist presence based not on exploitive stereotypes but on a realistic dialogue between past and present. This dialogue is also a central theme for Richard MacKinnon and Lachlan MacKinnon as they consider the class-related cultural heritage of another island. Coal mining and steelmaking run deep in the collective memory of Cape Breton Islanders, and MacKinnon and MacKinnon show how the associated class struggle is embedded in ‘the stories, songs, language and rituals of these worksites’, as well as giving rise to *lieux de mémoire*. As Cape Breton continues in the twenty-first century to cope with the loss of its major industries, the authors argue that industrial heritage retains a key role in retaining community cohesion, offering ‘a future-oriented sense of resistance against economic decline by tapping into the pre-existing culture of working-class consciousness and solidarity’.

Robert Summerby-Murray then discusses the efforts at various sites throughout the Maritime provinces to promote tourism but also to represent cultural identity to audiences including both tourists and more local visitors. Summerby-Murray finds that there is a source of profound tension between, on the one hand, the appetite of visitors for ‘authenticity’ and, on the other, the tendency of industrial heritage sites to sanitise – downplaying the ‘dirt, noise [and] environmental pollution’ of heavy industry – and also to seek to entertain. Although industrial heritage presents opportunities for regeneration, the danger remains that ‘collective memories of real experiences of labour, gender and environmental legacy’ will be ‘replaced by a landscape of consumption and spectacle’. Finally in this section, Janelle Skeard explores another unique example of class-based identity formation as shown in the resilience of the single-industry ore-mining town of Buchans, NL. After mining ceased in 1984, the town faced a profound challenge to its

survival, and Skeard shows that its success in remaining viable despite economic dislocation and population decline owed much to a 'social cohesion [that] was formed through decades of shared history and struggle, producing a form of social capital that has been immensely valuable'.

The second group of four essays (the first group in Volume 31 of the journal) turns the focus to heritage and environment. Claire Campbell revisits the environmental history of one of the region's highest-profile heritage sites, Grand Pré. Not only a National Historic Site but also, since 2012, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, this former Acadian marshland settlement can be seen at one level as a shining example of sustainable agriculture. As Campbell shows, however, a more rigorous heritage-related understanding of Grand Pré must also extend to the later, more scientific and industrial history of the site and its surrounds. Only by considering all of the elements of this complex past can a genuine appreciation emerge of 'the realities of modern agriculture and the need for sustainable alternatives'. A complex past is also revealed in Edward MacDonald's examination of economic regeneration efforts in the distinctive physical and cultural environment of Prince Edward Island (PEI). As a small island society at the edge of a continent, PEI suffered a profound economic setback with the abrupt decline of its shipbuilding industry during the 1870s. The result, however, was not resignation and stasis, but rather a series of innovations – all of them drawing on environmental and/or cultural heritage – that for MacDonald suggest 'a population seriously grappling with economic dislocation rather than simply learning to live with it'. None of the innovations, ranging from lobster fishing to fox farming and seed potato production, and finally to tourism, proved entirely successful but all of them were active strategies that 'stubbornly confronted the essential geographical dilemma of the Island's economy' and illustrated the resiliency of the continuing 'quest for sustainable economic prosperity'. Sustainability is also an important concern of Dean Bavington and Daniel Banoub in their study of culture and heritage as seen in the development of Newfoundland fish farming in the wake of the collapse of the wild northern cod stocks. For Bavington and Banoub, 'culture' is central to this process. This complex word applies to aquaculture, they show, both in the sense of culturing the cod to abandon cannibalistic ways that exist in the wild and in that of culturing fishers through 'developing savage hunters into professional harvesters'. The outcome must still take time to become clear, but in the meantime 'the diversity, complexity and interconnections of aquacultures in Newfoundland illustrate an ongoing process, stories in the

making'. Finally, Erin Kelly examines the possibilities for regeneration in another of Newfoundland's primary industries. Heritage considerations, Kelly argues, are important in forestry in the context that 'citizens of the island have a long-standing relationship with its forests steeped in traditional subsistence uses'. However, this sensibility rests uneasily with commercial and industrialised approaches to forest harvesting, and the processing of the resource in the now-declining pulp and paper sector. In the future, 'community forest government and development' will likely favour small business rather than industrialised corporations, making heritage-based knowledge and practice an important tool of regeneration.

The third and final group of essays also deals with the role of heritage in regeneration, but with a policy-related orientation. Simon Lloyd takes an approach to the value of 'memory institutions' – libraries, archives, museums – in creating sound cultural foundations for economic regeneration that, in the spirit of the original Swansea conference, adopts a comparative perspective. Although the main focus is on Prince Edward Island, the essay explores these themes as they affect PEI through an extended comparison with Wales. Although relative funding levels in the two jurisdictions are comparable, effective planning for the future of memory institutions is much more evident in Wales. Advocacy is needed in this area, Lloyd concludes, because well-chosen investments 'can produce demonstrable benefits out of all proportion to the amount spent'. In the second of the essays, Jane H. Reid and John G. Reid sketch a broad context of repeated de-industrialisations in the Maritime provinces as the essential background to heritage-related urban regeneration in the region. While this chronological multiplicity presents difficulties to the emergence of coherent historical memory, a further complication arises from the absence of an effective policy framework for evaluation of heritage-related regeneration efforts. The essay advocates both a 'place-based' approach to evaluation and a regionally-integrated structure for policy guidance. Finally, Jill L. Grant and Gladys Wai Kwan Leung take the city of Halifax as a focus for examining the changing relationship between cultural priorities and new governance patterns in urban regeneration. Whereas in the recent past heritage considerations took priority, the emergence through the networking of young urban professionals – markedly influenced by creative city arguments – has signalled a new emphasis on distinctive architecture and urban density. Thus, the meaning of regeneration itself has become more fluid and characterised by competing visions of how resilience can and should be defined.

While the essays comprised in these two volumes of the *London Journal of Canadian Studies* are diverse in their specific themes, they are united by a belief that heritage and regeneration are closely and inextricably connected. The persistent resilience of Atlantic Canada and its communities is a profound and recurrent historical reality. As this robust aptitude stretches forward from the present day a deep and sophisticated heritage awareness can be seen as forward-looking rather than backward-looking. Recovery from economic dislocation, environmental prudence and the seizure of sustainable opportunities demands no less.

## Notes

- 1 We are very grateful to Michael Williams, Graham Humphrys and Huw Bowen, the organisers of the conference in Swansea that originated this project. Entitled *Regeneration, Heritage and Cultural Identity: Transatlantic Perspectives*, the conference was held at the National Waterfront Museum on 22 June 2013. It was sponsored by the Canadian Studies in Wales Group/Cylch Astudiaethau Canadaidd Yng Nghymru/Association Galloise des études canadiennes, and we thank this group not only for its role in the conference but for its consistent encouragement and support for the publication of the essays. We are also most grateful to Tony McCulloch, Senior Fellow in North American Studies at the UCL Institute of the Americas, as Editor of the *London Journal of Canadian Studies*, to UCL Press and, of course, to all the contributors to the collection.
- 2 E.R. Forbes, *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1989).
- 3 R. Starr, *Equal as Citizens: The Tumultuous and Troubled History of a Great Canadian Idea* (Halifax: Formac Publishing Company, 2014).
- 4 I. McKay and R. Bates, *In the Province of History: The Making of the Public Past in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

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