

Research article

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Gordon Stewart^{1,*}

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*Correspondence: Stewar14@msu.edu

¹Michigan State University, USA

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Abstract

This article questions the notion of the North Atlantic Triangle as developed by John Bartlet Brebner and asks whether it ever really existed in the form that he suggested. It examines Brebner's motives in advancing the triangular concept and finds them to be rooted in a view of Canadian history that eschewed a nationalist emphasis favouring either the USA or the British Empire. It also suggests that there is a basic flaw in the North Atlantic Triangle idea, in that relations between the three parties have been generally benign and that all three parties accepted the triangle notion, whereas the fundamental direction of US policy towards Canada since 1776 has been to break the link between Britain and Canada. Cooperation between the USA, Canada and Britain was at its height when Brebner wrote his book and chose the title *North Atlantic Triangle* and, for that reason, the phrase was a period piece. It may have its uses in the fields of diplomacy and international relations but it needs to be interpreted much more broadly than Brebner managed to do if it is to be of value in fully understanding the history of the North Atlantic world.

Keywords North Atlantic Triangle; Canadian nationalism; US policy towards Canada; John Bartlet Brebner; Canada–UK relations.

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In Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are bewildered by their journey to England. Guildenstern worries that England is 'just a conspiracy of cartographers'. This characteristic Stoppardian exchange prompts a fundamental question about the North Atlantic Triangle. Does it actually exist or is it merely a conspiracy of scholars? We know that the phrase was invented by scholar John Bartlet Brebner in his 1945 book *North Atlantic Triangle: The interplay of Canada, the United States, and Great Britain*. We also know that the phrase appears in other book and article titles and in conference proceedings. Four representative examples, showing the range of applications, are B. J. C. McKercher and Lawrence Aronson, eds, *The North Atlantic Triangle in a Changing World: Anglo-America–Canadian relations, 1902–1956* (1996), an article by J. R. Miller's in *Studies in Religion*, 'Bigotry in the North Atlantic Triangle: Irish, British and American influences on Canadian anti-Catholicism, 1850–1900' (1987); C. C. Eldridge, ed., *Kith and Kin: Canada, Britain and the United States from the revolution to the Cold War* (1997); and David G. Haglund's volume in the Canadian Institute of International Affairs series on the contemporary world, *The North Atlantic Triangle Revisited* (2000) which expands the British point on the Triangle to encompass the other NATO countries in Europe.¹

For scholars, such a thing as the North Atlantic Triangle clearly exists. But does it exist outside scholarly discourse? If we contrast the concept of the North Atlantic Triangle with another related concept – the 'special relationship' between the United States and Britain – the difference is striking. In most pub or café or dinner gatherings of friends you could easily fall into conversation, or nowadays probably an argument, about the alleged 'special relationship'. Newspaper editorials and opinion columnists will readily discuss the 'special relationship', assuming the public already knows what they are referring to. Similarly, although the example is more tentative, you could easily get into a conversation in Minneapolis or Winnipeg on the notion that Canada and the United States are good neighbours. Rotary clubs on both sides of the border still have solemn annual recognition ceremonies of the legendary undefended border. Although both the special relationship and good neighbourliness are contested concepts, most people have heard of them. The North Atlantic Triangle is not so robust. It does not have the same purchase in the public mind. It seems more fragile, a concept kept on life support by a relatively small network of scholars, rather than being a powerful reflection of historical and current realities that are part of the common stock of public knowledge.²

Even with that solicitous scholarly protection, the concept sometimes seems in danger of disappearing, like the smile of the Cheshire Cat. For example, in his assessment of the North Atlantic Triangle from the Second World War to the Cold War, Lawrence Aronson writes that:

at the end of the Second World War Canada, Great Britain, and the United States were in basic agreement on the matter of the new political order. These powers understood that their war-time 'special relationship' did extend to the world at large, and that if independent nation-states continued as the main actors in the international arena, some kind of formal organization would be necessary in the years ahead to resolve inevitable tensions and hostilities.³

This confident linking of the three 'powers' suggests frank and open sharing of views and sustained consultation on policy by three relatively equal players. Yet in the preceding chapter of the same book, John English points out that throughout the war:

Canada's exclusion from higher Allied planning left the King government in a strategic void. Ottawa received no advance warning of Anglo-American landings in North Africa. Neither was the decision to invade Sicily conveyed to King after the Casablanca conference. Most humiliating of all, the Canadian prime minister was actually roused from his sleep in the early hours of June 6 to be told that the invasion of Normandy had commenced.⁴

The communicative three powers of Aronson's account seem, in English's version, like two men and a dog, with Canada waiting for treats from the table – and English is writing about a period that is seen as the high-water mark of triangular interaction. And of course there is the trenchant case made by Jack Granatstein in various publications that the Second World War era was the climactic moment of the historical process beginning at the end of the Great War that saw Canada retreating from the British Empire while being drawn into a subservient position in the new American Empire.⁵ The concept of a triangle almost dissolves in this view of history because the story is one of the rapidly fading light at one of the three points, rather than a story of three points permanently and brightly lit, each communicating respectfully and earnestly with one another. In a review of a book which tried to breathe life into the concept, A. E. Campbell states bluntly that 'the triangle has effectively gone'.⁶ Thus

it seems reasonable, 80 years after the invention of the phrase, to ask whether a North Atlantic triangle ever existed.

This question of authenticity about the concept was there right at its origins. Brebner himself explained that he introduced the triangle metaphor hesitantly. In a paper he prepared at the request of the Canada–United States Committee on Education, formed to come up with ideas on how ‘the study and teaching of American and Canadian history may be made more complementary in relevant ways’, he confessed he had doubts. Brebner noted that his ‘study, teaching, and authorship since 1918 have carried the writer to the reluctant conclusion that for satisfactory intelligibility the relationships [between Canada and the United States] must include Great Britain’.⁷ Thus, the scholarly birth of the North Atlantic Triangle was not a triumphant eureka moment for its inventor but one surrounded by hesitancy. Why did Brebner come so reluctantly to the concept that we now so readily associate with his name? As the 1948 paper explains, he did so because his main concern in the late 1940s was to promote the study of Canadian–American relations as a way of presenting a continentalist view of North American history. Because there was so much mutual ignorance on both sides of the border, Brebner worried that introducing a third, British dimension would broaden the required knowledge base too much. ‘The difficulty remains’, he continued, ‘that very few American and Canadian students understand the nature and significance of the great operative relationships between the two countries, and of how they protrude into the present with mighty effects.’ The Atlantic dimension was introduced reluctantly by Brebner only because it was necessary for his primary project – a continentalist account of Canadian history.

Brebner’s *North Atlantic Triangle* was the final one in the series of 25 volumes on Canadian–American relations sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The general editor was James T. Shotwell. Shotwell’s own career, and his values, reflected the overarching purpose of this monumental scholarly enterprise. As Shotwell phrased it, the entire series would demonstrate ‘the way in which statesmanship and common sense have ultimately built up a technique for the settlement of disputes between the United States and Canada which can and should furnish a model to all the world’.⁸ His own career was a living demonstration of these sentiments. He was born in Ontario; family members moved to Michigan and Kansas and did not think twice about doing so; he taught at Columbia University before moving to government service in the Wilson administration; he played a key role in

the discussions and drafting of papers that led to the Kellogg–Briand Pact of 1928 renouncing war as an instrument of national policy.⁹ Because of this ethos, the Carnegie series emphasised negotiation, compromise, accommodation and the gradual development of good neighbourliness. There was some divergence from this perspective in the volumes by the Canadian authors, most notably Donald Creighton's *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* (1956) which portrayed the United States and Canada as natural rivals in North America, but the power of the overall message subdued such countervailing interpretations. As the culminating volume, Brebner's *North Atlantic Triangle* chimed in with the spirit of the series. The big theme was 'the geographical basis for the continental interplay'. Because both the United States and Canada had been, and were still, linked politically and culturally to the United Kingdom, the story had to have its British dimension, but the centre of attention was North American relationships.

Like Shotwell, Brebner was a transplanted Canadian who became a US citizen in the late 1930s. Many of those connected with the series had similar cross-border backgrounds. They were the products of not only a particular historical era but also a certain section of society, the top end of the professional and academic middle class. Brebner's father, for example, was the Registrar of the University of Toronto. In a recent doctoral dissertation from McGill University, Edward P. Kohn has reminded us that the Anglo-American rapprochement in c.1900 had as one of its elements the convergence of elite views in English Canada and the Eastern United States along the lines that both countries shared a common racial heritage. American and English Canadian establishment figures

often drew upon the common lexicon of Anglo-Saxon rhetoric to undermine the old rivalries and underscore their shared interests. Though the predominance of Anglo-Saxonism at the turn of the century proved short-lived, it left a legacy of Canadian-American goodwill, as both nations accepted their shared destiny on the continent, and Canada as a key link in the North Atlantic triangle.¹⁰

A telling sign that Brebner's outlook was shaped by these class and racial traditions was his comment about the emergence over 250 years of 'a high degree of common North American culture'. He noted that when people from outside North America looked at Canada and the United States, they tended to see more commonality than difference. Brebner endorsed that view on the grounds that in the United States and Canada,

‘the human stock is about the same except in its proportions of French and Negro population’.¹¹

The context for Brebner’s invention of the North Atlantic Triangle has been further illuminated by Rohit Aggarwala’s work, who has made a careful investigation of the Brebner Papers in the Columbia University Archives. Brebner’s correspondence shows that he conceptualised his work in opposition to current approaches to Canadian nationalism. In the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, there were two emerging national narratives that began to shape modern historical scholarship in Canada. The first approach is associated with A. J. M. Lower (and, later, Frank Underhill), who presented a narrative which

emphasized Canada’s separateness from Britain and its distinct North American character. It identified with the Liberal Party’s goals of creating Canadian institutions separate from British ones and finding Canada an equal role in the Empire, and it cast as the heroes of Canadian history those Liberal leaders and policies that encouraged Canada’s transformation from a British colony into a separate nation. This contrasted with the nationalism espoused by [Donald Grant] Creighton, which emphasized Canada’s ties to Britain and membership in the Empire as the aspects which kept Canada separate and distinct from the United States. Creighton’s heroes were Sir John A. Macdonald and the Conservative leaders who countered American expansionism and opposed North American integration, and his contemporary ally was the Conservative Party. Thus, Canadian nationalism and Canadian history could be said to have split into two camps, one the British Empire Canada ‘Conservative version’ of Canadian history, the other the North American Canada ‘Liberal version’.¹²

Brebner found both of these approaches unsatisfactory because they were, in their different ways, too chauvinistic.

As early as 1935, Brebner sketched out his misgivings about the limitations of these presentations of Canada’s past. It needs to be stated immediately that Brebner was not an uncritical continentalist in his thinking. He was less naive than Shotwell, for example, in seeing the Carnegie series as a model account of peaceful coexistence when so much of the story was about the contest for power in North America or that the North American case (with all its unique features) could serve as a model for the rest of the world. While he viewed Canadian–American

relations as relatively peaceful and drew attention to ‘a shared common Anglo-Saxon heritage of freedom and individual rights, he saw the dangers the United States had posed to Canada throughout its history and never accepted uncritically the myth of the “undefended border”’.¹³ Nevertheless, he was quite sure that the two Canadian nationalist narratives were heading down the wrong path. In his 1935 article on ‘Canada, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the Washington Conference’, Brebner ‘first presented the sense of Canadian nationhood and identity that he would continue to hold through the rest of his life, and it was an identity that found serious fault with both the Creightonian British Empire nationalism and the Lower/Underhill Canadian North American nationalism’. He argued that both these concepts of Canadian nationalism were too simplistic ‘in identifying Canada as either primarily British or primarily North American (or non-British)’.¹⁴

It was in this context that Brebner began thinking of a North Atlantic triangle. He was fundamentally concerned with the presentation of Canadian history. His own career had shown how political allegiance could move between the two countries. He believed his own experience validated this approach to understanding Canadian history. ‘This was the central core of Brebner’s belief in an international North Atlantic Triangle: that political allegiance was easily moved because the three countries—Canada, the United States, and Britain—were politically so similar.’ So he wished to promote a triangularly textured continentalist approach to presenting Canadian history. ‘The Canadianism he articulated was a sophisticated, intellectual, tolerant, liberal nationalism; it differed from both the British Empire nationalism and the North American Canadian nationalism, particularly in its reluctance to be either anti-American or anti-British.’¹⁵

The contemporary intellectual and political settings help us to understand Brebner’s view of what was at stake. For example, when Frank Underhill made a comment on the Ogdensburg Agreement along the lines that Canada now had two loyalties, many of ‘Ontario’s pro-British nationalists’ were infuriated and petitioned for Underhill’s removal from the University of Toronto. Brebner took this to be an example of how overwrought Canadian nationalism was becoming. ‘Canada is going through some difficult adjustments,’ he wrote, ‘for Canadians can’t get it through their heads that the Ogdensburg Agreement isn’t somehow treasonable to Great Britain. They need to have the Anglo-American world pattern hammered into them.’¹⁶ The last sentence tells a lot about Brebner’s thinking. For Brebner, the North Atlantic Triangle concept was

invented as a method for correcting emerging nationalist versions of Canadian history.

In that respect Brebner failed. His view of Canadian history, not surprisingly, never caught on in Canada. As Aggarwala points out, Brebner was Canada's

only major historian not to write its history solely as a nation-building narrative. Brebner's Canada was a nation that had agency, was separate from both the United States and Britain, but was also deeply part of a community that included both. He cast Canada as an actor dealing with inevitable influences from abroad – foreign but not alien, because Canada, Britain and the United States all shared a legal and cultural heritage and on-going ties that made interaction necessary and healthy.¹⁷

This deeper appreciation of Brebner's complicated orientation during the 1930s and 1940s explains a basic flaw in the triangle analogy. The flaw was there from the very beginning. The working title of Brebner's book 'Rival Partners' conveyed the historically accurate view that there had been more enmity and tensions than friendly interaction.¹⁸ By choosing instead the title 'North Atlantic Triangle', the connotation was conveyed that the three-way relationship had generally been benign because the eventual outcome was the open, decent and tolerant dominion of Canada working hand in hand with a friendly United States. This flaw can be seen working through much of the scholarship on the triangle. Although, as we have seen, Brebner himself was primarily concerned with developing a non-nationalistic view of Canadian history, the scholars who took up the phrase in their work were typically in the fields of foreign relations and military history. To a considerable extent, this was because the phrase first appeared in the era of the Second World War and, whatever private intellectual campaign Brebner was embarked upon, the wider scholarly world naturally thought it was a wonderful phrase to use in connection with Anglo-American-Canadian diplomatic relations broadly construed. The concept was particularly favoured by Canadian scholars because it allowed Canada to punch above its weight in scholarly representations of the past. It kept – and still keeps – Canada as a player alongside the world's current greatest power and the world's previous great power – and in so doing, appears to give Canada a remarkable place on the world stage.

In that context, it has certainly been a useful concept for investigating and assessing Canada's place on the international scene. But the concept also retains a basic weakness, reflected in Brebner's own struggle with whether to emphasise rivalry or cooperation in his title. The flaw is that the triangle metaphor assumes there are three fixed points with all players, in spite of having unequal power, respecting and recognising their places – that is the only way the triangle can be maintained. The concept implies that all three countries are equally committed to the metaphor. In the case of the United States, this is an egregious error. Far from having an interest in maintaining a triangular Atlantic system, American policymakers had long seen it as the goal of US foreign policy to break the link between Britain and Canada. The North Atlantic Triangle concept obscures this fundamental direction of US policy towards Canada from the founding of the republic in 1776.

A telling modern example of this underlying dynamic of American thinking is Adolf Berle, Assistant Secretary in the State Department who worked as an expert on Canadian matters during the 1940s. In June 1940, a Canadian landing party was sent to Ivigtut in the Danish possession of Greenland. The Canadian government had its own interest in what would happen to Greenland in the wartime conditions, but they had also been asked by Anthony Eden, the Dominions Secretary, in a secret request, to safeguard the cryolite mines at Ivigtut. The Canadian Chargé in Washington was summoned to the State Department and told that President Theodore Roosevelt would be very angry if Canada proceeded to occupy any part of Greenland. Berle lectured on the inappropriateness of 'this type of 1890 imperialism, adding that "the days of Cecil Rhodes had passed".¹⁹

Berle's interactions with Hugh Keenleyside, who had served since 1928 in Canada's Department of External Affairs and was Canadian Secretary to the Permanent Joint Board of Defence from 1940 to 1944, showed the implications of this attitude for Canada. In Ottawa to discuss economic coordination in the wake of the Ogdensburg Agreement, Berle noted with evident pleasure how far matters had gone in bringing Canada into the American sphere. While he and Keenleyside did talk of immediate issues, Berle explained, 'the rest of it goes much further. Keenleyside realises that this is now one continent and one economy; that we shall have to be integrated as to finance, trade routes and pretty much everything else; and in this I so thoroughly agree with him that it is refreshing.'²⁰ This was the same Hugh Keenleyside who had written a book, published in 1929 prior to the emollient Carnegie series, on

Canada and the United States: Some aspects of their historical relationship, in which he had characterised American motives in the War of 1812 as ‘an imperialistic lust for the conquest of Canada’ and warned that American interest in modern Canada was a consequence of ‘the growing demand for markets and raw materials’.²¹ By 1945, after a happy visit with John Hickerson, Assistant Chief of Western European Affairs and in charge of Canada at the State Department, Keenleyside could write that ‘after three days in Texas I understand and share your enthusiasm. It’s a grand country. How about a new federation consisting of Texas and British Columbia. We could really go places.’²² This jocular comment shows how far Keenleyside had come since 1929.

The problem with the triangular metaphor is that it tends to keep out of focus the grand American strategy with respect to Canada. Willard Thorp, Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, summed up this long-standing feature of American policy during the negotiations between Canada and the United States in the winter of 1947–8. It seemed there was a distinct possibility of complete free trade between the two. If that could be achieved, Thorp noted, it would

result in the immediate elimination of all Empire preferences granted by Canada with important economic and political implications for the United States . . . [It was] a unique opportunity of promoting the most efficient utilization of the resources of the North American continent and knitting the two countries together – an objective of U.S. foreign policy since the founding of the republic.²³

The first modern bureaucratic articulation of this American goal was developed by Claude H. Pepper of the Bureau of Trade Relations, who prepared the American case and advised President Taft during the reciprocity negotiations of 1910–11. Pepper presented reciprocity as a means of preventing the trend towards closer economic and political cooperation with the British Empire.

British imperial politics now add to the importance of finding practical expressions for this sentiment. The possibility of a so-called Tariff reform or protectionist government within the next few years, if not within a few months is taken into account. The reflex of this movement is felt in Canada in the demand for closer commercial bonds between the Dominion and the UK as a means of strengthening the political connection.²⁴

The United States needed to break that connection. In his public statements and speeches, and in his private letters, Taft showed he fully appreciated the long-term issues at stake. In a confidential note to former President Roosevelt written in January 1911, Taft argued that

the amount of Canadian products we would take would produce a current of business between western Canada and the United States that would make Canada only an adjunct of the United States. It would transfer all their important business to Chicago and New York, with all their bank credits and everything else, and it would increase greatly the demand in Canada for our manufactures. I see this is an argument against reciprocity in Canada and I think it is a good one.²⁵

In his special message to Congress announcing the proposed arrangement, Taft declared that reciprocal trade with Canada was designed to:

enlarge our supply of natural resources [by gaining] direct access to her great supply of natural products without an obstructive, prohibiting tariff . . . They are coming to a parting of the ways, they must soon decide whether they are to regard themselves as isolated permanently from our markets by a perpetual wall or whether we are to be commercial friends.²⁶

The ‘parting of the ways’ phrase was, of course, seized upon by the Conservative opposition and pro-empire forces in Canada and used with great effect to defeat the proposal. The phrase, however, does reveal the goal Taft and his advisers had in mind.

The persistence of this mentality is evident in a paper prepared in 1931 by Benjamin Wallace, a Canadian expert in the Office of the Economic Advisor, which sketched out a historical overview of American’s Canadian policy. Wallace opened by stating bluntly that the greatest error in American commercial policy had been to confront Canada with its high tariff wall:

Canadians are of the same language and stock, and have essentially the same standard of living, and the same political outlook and ideals as Americans. The boundary between us is largely artificial, and Canada is so divided geographically that the natural trade routes are north and south. There is no military or political, or economic reason for not treating Canada as economically part of the United States.²⁷

This approach to Canada was taken up by John Hickerson, the primary State Department official for Canadian matters in the 1930s and 1940s. One of the experts he regularly brought in was Professor W. Y. Elliot of the Department of Government at Harvard University. (Elliott was the Harvard mentor of Henry Kissinger and also taught Pierre Trudeau, to whom he wrote in 1969 to complain about Canada's nationalist policies.) In his position papers for the State Department, he focused on the importance of gaining access to Canada's mineral resources. The United States should abandon its aggressive tariff policy in the case of Canada to encourage the freer flow of such resources. The strategic goal was to break the empire link, recently revitalised by the Ottawa trade agreements in 1932. 'Canadian participation in this economic imperialism', he advised Hickerson, 'is based on resentment of American trade policy . . . By allowing natural forces free play, the completely artificial and extremely threatening structure of imperial economic antagonism to the United States would collapse. The economic disadvantages to the United States of the Ottawa Empire Conference are obvious; the damages to friendly relations and international progress are incalculable.'²⁸ Berle encapsulated the essence of American policy when he declared, following the signing of the Ogdensburg Agreement, 'it does really change the status of the New World: a kind of Pax Americana'.²⁹ American policy in the 1930s was shaped by this grand strategic goal of breaking the empire ties of Canada and although it was affected by them, it was not 'fueled by domestic considerations'.³⁰

This then was the core of American policy towards Canada – the goal was to reorient Canada and make it a North American complement of the United States. This basic and enduring feature of the American response to Canada can be traced from 1776 to the 1950s.³¹ In the mammoth and influential Carnegie series – because of its idealistic concern to illustrate international goodwill and cooperation, because of the current state of international relations and because of the personal and cultural forces at work in Canada and the United States government and academic establishments – this sharpish view of American policy was subdued to bring out the desired theme of evolving good-neighbourliness. It was in this environment that Brebner's North Atlantic Triangle emerged. He himself understood the historical rivalry but chose to privilege the good neighbour discourse. Presumably he preferred 'triangle' to 'rivals' because of the more benign sense of interaction it conveyed. Indeed, as we have seen, he was more concerned with writing non-nationalist Canadian history than he was with investigating US policies. In so doing, he

minimised the one-way direction of US policy towards Canada. Invented at a historical moment when cooperation was at a height never again to be attained, and when the Carnegie series was promoting the replacement of wars and bellicosity by negotiation and compromise, the North Atlantic Triangle from the outset had a benevolent cast to it. The phrase was a period piece.

In many ways it has never transcended its period. Although, as we have noted, the North Atlantic Triangle designation can be applied to any piece of scholarship that covers all three countries, the centre of gravity of the scholarship which uses the metaphor deals with the 1900–50s era, during which there was a dense network of diplomatic correspondence and related sources on how Canada sorted out its modern relationship to the British Empire and to the United States. For that period, the concept has been useful but even in that native habitat it did not produce a fully rounded understanding of American policy.

This defect with the triangular concept can also be exposed by looking at another topic to which Brebner made a major contribution and displayed a similar flaw – Nova Scotia and the American Revolution. Brebner's *The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia: A marginal colony during the Revolutionary War* (1937) has had a notable durability in the historiography of the American Revolution. As John Reid remarked recently it has been 'historiographically inescapable for several decades'.³² Reid then proceeds to show shortcomings in Brebner's approach to Nova Scotia. He does so by reviewing the career and work of Viola Barnes, a contemporary of Brebner's, who also wrote on Nova Scotia. Barnes always placed Nova Scotia in an Atlantic and empire context. In the middle and late decades of the eighteenth century, the colony's position was central (at least potentially) in the British Atlantic Empire. She pointed out, for example, that Francis Legge, Governor of Nova Scotia when the revolution broke out, envisaged that the colony would become 'the center of the Empire for the fishing of cod, and the granary of the West Indies . . .'.³³ In contrast, Brebner described Nova Scotia as marginal because he was thinking in continentalist terms.

Recent scholarship has validated the Barnes framework rather than the Brebner one. Books such as Bernard Bailyn's *Voyagers to the West* (1986) 'brought a North Atlantic perspective again' to Nova Scotia in the era of the American Revolution. Other publications in that year, I. K. Steele's *The English Atlantic* (1986) and D. W. Meinig's *The Shaping of America* (1986), also took a broad geographical approach to Atlantic America within which Nova Scotia's predicament could be more

fruitfully conceptualised.³⁴ Since the 1980s, British colonial history in North America has been placed in an Atlantic and comparative context as scholars look at the great arc of colonies from Newfoundland to the West Indies and often compare them to, or examine the intersections with, the Spanish, Portuguese and French possessions. The Atlantic orientation of scholarship has finally left Brebner's formulation behind.

As Reid points out, Brebner's view of the Atlantic was quite opposite from the way it has shaped scholarship since the 1980s – he saw it as a moat over which ideas crossed, rather than as a site of communication itself. 'When Brebner fully articulated his own version of a North Atlantic world (in his North Atlantic triangle book) it was one in which Great Britain was separated by the ocean from a North American continent that could and should be assessed historically in terms of the integration of its colonially-derived populations.'³⁵ For Brebner, the North Atlantic Triangle was a device, reluctantly adopted, for the better understanding of the development of continental complementarities – and hence, in his view, for a better understanding of Canada's evolution. It never helped much in providing a clear understanding of British and American roles. The insights of such classic books in the transatlantic field as Kenneth Bourne's *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America 1815–1908* (1967) and Robin W. Winks' *Canada and the United States: The Civil War years* (1960) stood without needing to engage with the triangular metaphor. In 1945, the North Atlantic Triangle seemed a concept that broadened the framework for analysis but now it seems too limited, circumscribed by Brebner's own continentalist outlook and the prevailing cross-border camaraderie of the Second World War era. All historical concepts reflect their own cultural moment, but this one seems fatally temporally bound.

Why does the concept have any life left at all? The main reason is that it is very helpful as a framework for studying the Second World War years and even the entire period from about 1900 to 1960, when Canada was redefining its relationships with the British Empire and the United States. There are real historical developments in these years that can only be fruitfully investigated in terms of three-way interactions. The articles in the edited volumes by McKercher and Aronson, and Eldridge, and the work of such scholars as Tony McCulloch on Roosevelt, Chamberlain and Mackenzie King, are ample testimony to the staying power of the triangle and the need to keep it in play if we are to achieve a deeper understanding of the forces at work in the 1930s and 1940s. A secondary explanation for the persistence of the triangle is that it has been, up to now, reassuring

for Canadian national esteem. In North Atlantic Triangle scholarship, Canadian issues and Canadian perspectives are brought in from their usual place on the margins of world history. And there is certainly an important story to tell from the Canadian viewpoint as Canada shaped its national course amid contending pressures emanating from the United States and Britain in the first half of the twentieth century.

The fate of the North Atlantic triangle raises some interesting issues regarding Canadian history and history writing in general. Let us give Brebner all the credit he deserves. He wanted to write a history of Canada that would pay sustained attention to the ways in which Canada's history had been shaped by the interaction with both the United States and Britain. He thought that the openness of Canada's historical experience meant that histories written from an internalist perspective were certain to be rather narrow, shaped by a somewhat precious parochial nationalism. He was also writing before the impact of social and cultural approaches to the past which have transformed the field of history since the 1960s. He was writing before the explosion of Canadian literary activity, both anglophone and francophone, that has put Canadian literature prominently on the world map. It is now possible to celebrate genuine internationally recognised accomplishments within Canada while barely mentioning Britain or America. It is now possible to write Canadian social and cultural history and place it in broad international comparative contexts, as well as recognising its own cosmopolitan characteristics within Canada. Working when he did, at a time when Canadian national development was assessed in terms of economics, politics and war experiences, when history writing focused on national leaders and when it was still possible to write about Canada while largely ignoring Quebec, his plea that the story could only be well told if it looked at triangular interplay was a plausible one to make.

Indeed, several highly respected scholars, from a range of perspectives, have endorsed some aspects of Brebner's concerns about the turning inward of Canadian history writing. In the great outburst of Canadian nationalist history in the 1960s, largely a reaction to the continentalist trends since the 1930s, books like W. L. Morton's *The Canadian Identity* (1961) and *The Kingdom of Canada* (1963), George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* (1965) and Donald Creighton's *Canada's First Century* (1970) treated the connection with Britain as a factor still to be reckoned with. Indeed, conservative historians like Creighton and Morton saw the British aspects of Canada as an essential, historically validated, shield against further Americanisation. But that transatlantic

dimension to Canadian historical scholarship receded rapidly after the 1960s. Philip Buckner, when President of the Canadian Historical Association in 1993, wondered what had happened to the British Empire in Canadian historiography as attention focused on a teleological narrative of Canadian autonomy.³⁶ As Doug Owram has also noted in the *Oxford History of the British Empire*, by the 1980s, 'the unavoidable fact was that the Empire–Commonwealth was moving from the mainstream to the margins of Canadian life. In parallel, Canadian historiography relegated its treatment of Imperial history to the same fate.'³⁷ This was partly due to the general condition of postcoloniality as Canada, like other former colonies, sought to discover and nurture its own Indigenous narratives. It was partly due to the replacement of political and economic history with social history and cultural studies. In his controversial jeremiad against many of these trends, Jack Granatstein claimed that Canadian history had been killed.³⁸ By this he meant that studies of high politics and wars had been relegated to the sidelines by the new social and cultural history. These new trends were often shaped by sophisticated developments in the discipline of history itself, but Granatstein argued their local and group orientation led to the abandonment of Canadian history within a national framework. Whatever the reasons, empire-related commentaries on Canadian history sank below the horizon along with national political and military history. That is a loss that Brebner had feared would happen.

In this general post-1960s scholarly and cultural setting, Brebner's North Atlantic Triangle seemed utterly irrelevant. It could be argued that had Brebner continued to write on Canadian history instead of turning his attention to British history, he might have kept the empire in play. But that is doubtful. As we have seen, he himself had a continentalist approach to Canada – the very disease the nationalist writers of the 1960s and the traditionalist like Granatstein saw as symptomatic of the woeful succumbing to the United States in the 1918–50 era. It could be argued on grounds of historical accuracy that Brebner was right and should be taken more seriously – that is, he was right in claiming that Canadian history cannot be understood apart from American and British history. But even if such a triangularly attentive history of Canada were written, which publisher would take it and who would pay any attention? Giving time to such history seems to be increasingly irrelevant to being Canadian. The multicultural nation that Canada has become means that different kinds of representations of the nation's past seem to be what is needed.

John Ralston Saul has presented one such version in his *Reflections on a Siamese Twin: Canada at the end of the twentieth century*, in which he proposed that Canada is 'a perpetually incomplete experiment'.³⁹ In this book, he argues that Canadian culture is always in the making and is the result not of the North Atlantic Triangle, but the triangular interactions between native peoples, anglophone and francophone Canadians. Saul makes some fantastical historical claims. For example, that the loyalists were non-European in their ideology and values and sought meaning in the intriguing, mysterious northern landscapes of Canada. By contrast, the United States, in spite of its revolution, remained a European-style state – seeking internal unity and external territorial expansion. Saul also proposed that the Confederation of 1867 had nothing to do with economic matters or Western expansion but was an example of Canadian love of experimentation in all public matters.⁴⁰ And so on. That such a book could be written is a sign that new national narratives are being created in Canada. Such narratives will reduce even further the salience of the British Empire dimension and its related North Atlantic framework because, as Saul puts it, it is a matter of 'ideas over facts'.⁴¹ Ramsay Cook, in a paper, speaks of Canada as a 'post-nationalist nation',⁴² where, presumably, no grand national narratives are possible or even needed. If Canada is a work in progress, then the old history can simply be forgotten and new public memories of the past constituted.

But facts on the ground are stubborn things. England did exist, in spite of the doubts of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. So did the North Atlantic Triangle. Imagine what a fully conceptualised and opened-up history of the North Atlantic Triangle would be like. It would not simply be a triangle of Canadian, British and American political leaders and policymakers. Such a history would be shaped by all the recent scholarship on the Atlantic world and it would include social, cultural and migration history, taking into consideration the histories of the native peoples living in it and the slaves and freed people of colour who were part of it, as well as all the intellectual and literary interconnections. Brebner's version of the triangle was born of expediency rather than conceptual power and has never, even down to present scholarship, cast such a wide net as this.

There have been attempts to revitalise the triangle, of course, one example being the volume edited by C. C. Eldridge from the papers presented at the two Lampeter conferences dealing with the triangle. But while there were first-rate individual contributions to that book by some very distinguished scholars, the conceptualisation of the North Atlantic Triangle remained too rudimentary, that is to say too close

to Brebner's flawed one. The very title chosen, *Kith and Kin*, reflected the orientation. No matter how many moments of tension or episodes of war are included, scholarship that deals with the triangle usually returns to the theme of mutual understanding and convergence among elite groups. In his introduction to the volume, Eldridge chose to end by noting with satisfaction that 'the commonality of purpose of the three countries has survived the trial and tribulations of the twentieth century'.⁴³ And, almost needless to say, the book, because of its British provenance, was judged wanting by some critics in Canada because it allegedly did not pay enough attention to Canada. Since Brebner, the notion that triangular history should end up explaining Canadian history has been the *sine qua non* and Canadians like the triangle because it makes them significant players on the stage of history. Granatstein complained, somewhat huffily, that 'this huge undertaking does not work. Its major flaw lies in the way that the British scholars write about Canadian history without archival research and a mastery of the printed sources.'⁴⁴ Granatstein's barbs directed at the Lampeter volume suggest another faultline in scholarship on the triangle. He thinks that Canada was neglected. A more characteristic problem with triangle scholarship is that it neglects the United States. The scholarship generally falters in fully exploring American perspectives. Earlier in this article, I provided some examples from the 1900–50 period to show how American thinking is often not fully explored. Behind the good neighbour rhetoric of that critical era was a deliberate American policy of consolidating US hegemony in North America. Another illustration of the United States being out of focus comes at the very beginning of the North Atlantic triangle. In his chapter 'The political persistence of British North America, 1763–1815' in the Lampeter volume, Peter Marshall invites us (briefly) to think about the American perspective. He notes that 'attempts to locate in this period the antecedents of Manifest Destiny prove unavailing'.⁴⁵ On the War of 1812, he wonders whether 'a more accurate title would be the British and Indian War, or possibly, if Americans found it more familiar, the Prince Regent's War'.⁴⁶ There are actual American answers to these questions. For example, Congressman Israel Pickens sent an address to his district in North Carolina two months after the peace treaty had been concluded at Ghent. 'The British ministers were compelled to abandon every part of their arrogant demands, and the treaty is precisely agreeable to the terms proposed by our own commissioners. Thus gloriously has terminated this second war for our independence.'⁴⁷ Setting aside his

partisan American view of the treaty, he had a clear sense of what the war meant to the new nation and communicated that view to the voters, even inventing a name for the war.

Ever since the formal recognition of American independence in 1783, many American politicians and administration officials had viewed Canada, a colony of the arrogant British, as a comprehensive threat to the new country. The British used their base in Canada to intrigue with Native American leaders and interfere in US domestic affairs by encouraging the separation of the western states and territories. The sense of paranoia can be seen in a letter from John Jay to Thomas Jefferson, in the course of which Jay claimed that Canada had even played a role in instigating Shay's 1786 rebellion in Massachusetts. Jay informed Jefferson that 'a variety of considerations afford room for Suspicion that there is an Understanding between the Insurgents in Massachusetts and some leading Persons in Canada'.⁴⁸ We are so accustomed to seeing Canada as the threatened entity in the triangle that it requires a deliberate effort to see things from the standpoint of a new, vulnerable, fissiparous America in the 1783–1830 era. Bringing the American perspective into sharper focus, rather than simply summarising the American position from often teleological Canadian and British viewpoints, will add some analytical originality to triangular scholarship. In this instance, the early interactions within the North Atlantic Triangle help us understand the origins of the paranoid style in the United States which has played such a potent role in American politics and in America's view of the world.

In his critique of Brebner's work on Nova Scotia, Reid is not quite fair to Brebner. Reid argues with great effectiveness that Barnes' Atlantic contextualisation of late-eighteenth-century Nova Scotia has stood the test of time better than Brebner's one of marginality.⁴⁹ But Barnes' writings deal only with Governor Legge and the merchants in Halifax. Brebner at least made a stab at trying to understand how the great mass of ordinary New England farmers and fishermen responded to the challenging conditions of the revolutionary era. In doing so, Brebner accidentally anticipated future scholarship that would pay attention to ordinary people in the revolutionary period. For a brief moment he glimpsed the social interpretations of the revolution that in other colonies had to wait until the scholarship of the 1960s. But both Brebner and Barnes missed out completely other groups in Nova Scotia in the late eighteenth century – the so-called Black loyalists, the native peoples, the German and Yorkshire settlers, the Acadian remnants and Jamaican maroons who were brought up to work on fortifications in the 1790s.⁵⁰

It is a tribute to Brebner's work (and his skill in choosing titles) that his books on the North Atlantic Triangle and Nova Scotia during the American Revolution have been so well regarded for so long in spite of their shortcomings. Brebner's continental preoccupations left so much out of the Nova Scotia story that a comprehensive history of Nova Scotia in the revolutionary era still awaits its historian. So, too, does the North Atlantic Triangle.

Note on contributor

Gordon Stewart earned a First-Class Honours BA in Modern History at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, before crossing the Atlantic to make a career in Canadian and American universities and was elected the Jack and Margaret Sweet Professor of History at Michigan State University, USA. His books and articles focus on critical, multi-perspective assessments of various aspects of British Empire history, from North America to India. For example, he has written on the Dundee–Calcutta connection in *Jute & Empire: The Calcutta Jute Wallahs and the landscapes of Empire* (1998). His last book, *Journeys to Empire: Enlightenment, imperialism and the British encounter with Tibet 1774–1904* (2009), examines the complex ways in which Enlightenment modes of thinking supported and critiqued the empire.

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Research ethics statement

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The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Notes

- 1 McKercher and Aronson, eds, *North Atlantic Triangle in a Changing World*; Miller, 'Bigotry in the North Atlantic Triangle; Haglund, *The North Atlantic Triangle Revisited*; Eldridge, ed., *Kith and Kin*, are the result of two conferences held at Lampeter that were designed to bring the triangle up to date.
- 2 There are other regions of the world where the triangle metaphor is in use. For example, Lim, ed., *Growth Triangles in Southeast Asia*, which discusses meetings, plans and measurement of triangular economic interactions between Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. This international triangle has a substantive economic, political and diplomatic life that is articulated on a day-to-day basis. The North Atlantic triangle does not.
- 3 McKercher and Aronson, eds, *North Atlantic Triangle in a Changing World*, 184.
- 4 McKercher and Aronson, eds, *North Atlantic Triangle in a Changing World*, 172.
- 5 Granatstein, *Britain's Weakness*.
- 6 Campbell, 'Review of C. C. Eldridge, ed., *Kith and Kin*', 508.
- 7 Brebner, 'Canada in North American history', 656.
- 8 In Tansill, *Canadian-American Relations*, viii.
- 9 Shotwell, *Autobiography*, 19, 291–3; Shotwell, 'A personal note', 42; Josephson, *James T. Shotwell*.
- 10 Kohn, 'Abstract', in 'This kindred people'.
- 11 Brebner, 'Canada in North American history', 658.
- 12 Aggarwala, "Non-resident me", 250–1.
- 13 Aggarwala, "Non-resident me", 245.
- 14 Aggarwala, "Non-resident me", 248.
- 15 Aggarwala, "Non-resident me", 254.
- 16 Aggarwala, "Non-resident me", 254.
- 17 Aggarwala, "Non-resident me", 239.
- 18 Aggarwala, "Non-resident me", 258.
- 19 Quoted in McKercher and Aronson, eds, *North Atlantic Triangle in a Changing World*, 150.
- 20 Berle and Jacobs, eds, *Navigating the Rapids*, 365.
- 21 Keenleyside, *Canada and the United States*, 48, 62, 263.
- 22 Hugh Keenleyside to John D. Hickerson, Laredo, Texas, 2 February 1945, Hickerson Papers, reel 5, National Archives, Washington, DC.
- 23 Memorandum by Willard Thorp, Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, to Undersecretary Robert Lovett, Washington, 8 March 1948, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1948, vol. 9, 406.
- 24 Memorandum by Charles M. Pepper and M. H. Davis, Bureau of Trade Relations, 23 May 1910, State Department Decimal File 1910–1929, Box 5795, RG 59, National Archives, Washington, DC.
- 25 William Howard Taft to Theodore Roosevelt, 10 January 1911, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Series 1, reel 96, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- 26 President Taft's Special Message to Congress, 26 January 1911, SDDF 1910–1929, Box 5795, RG 59, National Archives, Washington, DC.
- 27 Benjamin Wallace Memorandum, Office of the Economic Advisor, 6 December 1931, SDDF 1930–1939, Box 3178, RG 59, National Archives, Washington, DC.
- 28 W. Y. Elliott to John Hickerson, Cambridge, 27 February 1933, SDDF 1930–1939, Box 3181, RG 59, National Archives, Washington, DC.
- 29 Adolf Berle diary 1895–1971, 26 August 1939, reel 1, Michigan State University Archives and Libraries.
- 30 Eldridge, 'North Atlantic Triangle revisited', xx.
- 31 Stewart, *American Response to Canada*.

- 32 Reid, 'Viola Barnes', 6.
- 33 Reid, 'Viola Barnes', 5, 16, quoting from Barnes, 'Francis Legge', 426–7.
- 34 Reid, 'Viola Barnes', 18.
- 35 Reid, 'Viola Barnes', 15.
- 36 Buckner, 'Whatever happened to the British Empire?'
- 37 Owrarn, 'Canada and the empire', 157.
- 38 Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?*
- 39 Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, 15.
- 40 Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, 106, 125.
- 41 Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, 121–7.
- 42 Cook, 'Canada'.
- 43 Eldridge, 'The North Atlantic Triangle revisited', xxii.
- 44 Granatstein, 'Review of C. C. Eldridge, ed., *Kith and Kin*', 488–90.
- 45 Marshall, 'Political persistence of British North America', in Eldridge, ed., *Kith and Kin*, 7.
- 46 Marshall, 'Political persistence of British North America', 8.
- 47 Cunningham, *Circular Letters of Congressmen*, vol. 2, 1807–1817, 912.
- 48 John Jay to Thomas Jefferson, 14 December 1786, in Manning, ed., *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States*, 32.
- 49 Reid, 'Viola Barnes', 5, 16, 18.
- 50 Fortin, "'Blackened beyond our Native hue'".

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