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Review Article

Cape Breton's History

The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton History, 1713-1990. Edited by Kenneth Donovan. Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis/U College of Cape Breton P, 1990. Pp. 328. \$19.95.

Nineteenth Century Cape Breton: A Historical Geography. By Stephen Hornsby. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1992. Pp. 274. \$49.95.

Central to the cultural heart of Cape Breton lies the creative tension between its rural and urban realities. For most of the past century, three out of every four Cape Bretoners have lived in the urban complex surrounding Sydney. Yet almost everyone "in town" traces some sort of connection to the countryside. Even those not descended from country stock manage to have an intense relationship with the rural myth, which has figured powerfully in the cultural products of the past two decades. Yet this reality, and the interaction between the two, has not found much of a place in historical writing on the Island, which has tended to exist in two solitudes.

While Cape Breton's historical experiences have frequently been the subject of studies in various disciplines, no overarching analysis of its history has been published in this century. *The Island* is Louisbourg-based historian Ken Donovan's second edited collection, and the sixth anthology of original historical essays dealing with the Island to be published in the past two decades. Though only two of the 11 authors in this volume live

and work in Cape Breton, most either come from the Island or have spent some extensive time living here. As well, most of the essays are by-products of larger works completed as graduate theses, part of a broad awakening of regional-based scholarship that has seen the production of dozens of collections of essays.

The subjects of these essays range from French Louisbourg of the eighteenth century to the Sydney steel plant's tribulations under government ownership in the past two decades. Donovan himself has two essays. His extended introduction catalogues recent achievements in music and dance, painting and performing arts, literature and scholarship. An impressive list of achievements, it acknowledges the work of a number of associations and it reasserts the accepted wisdom that Island culture flows from the vital spirituality of Cape Breton's quality of life.

Donovan's second essay surveys a cultural awakening in the mid-1840s, when Sydney's tiny professional and bureaucratic middle class emerged to demand the attention of the Island community, as well as to represent Island interests before the remainder of Nova Scotians. It catalogues a previously undiscovered Sydney newspaper, the *Spirit of the Times*, situating its contributors within the colonial milieu, and uncovers a lively community with all of the concerns for modernity characteristic of the intellectual awakening sweeping the province at the time.

Sydney's middle classes linked themselves to that awakening, or at least aspired to levels of community awareness and the search for "improvement." It should be pointed out, however, that the bearers of most of this cultural awakening were from other parts of the province and left somewhat precipitously when the paper folded. So this early awakening of Cape Breton consciousness may not have been as important as one might assume.

In "Cape Breton and the North Atlantic World," Chris Moore chastises scholars for belittling the French achievement at Louisbourg. He argues that the eighteenth century was remarkable for its level of indigenous entrepreneurship. Ile Royale merchants actively participated in a North Atlantic economy and had as firm a grip on the Island's resources as any subsequent group of entrepreneurs. His reasoned plea for more attention to the mid-eighteenth century as a period of substantive social and economic development is balanced somewhat by Alex Storm's short essay regarding his own successful search for the treasure lost in 1725 aboard

the ill-fated French supply ship the *Chameau*. The tangle of regulations surrounding French administration of the Fortress and the circumstances that surrounded discovery and disposal of the booty might have made for an interesting magazine article, but it tells us little about Cape Breton, except perhaps for Storm's own entrepreneurship and the ease with which he gathered information from the historical records assembled by the fortress reconstruction project.

Cape Bretoners did not all start out from the same point; when their ancestors arrived and what they brought with them are the most important predictors of success. A materially stratified community was a feature from almost the very beginning. Stephen Hornsby and Rusty Bitterman contribute a pair of essays about nineteenth-century settlement: Hornsby from a geographer's sense of space, Bitterman from a close-grained study of Middle River, a community near the centre of the Island's agricultural heartland on the Bras d'or Lakes. Both conclude that successive waves of Scottish immigrants resulted in too many settlers chasing too few resources. The struggles of newer arrivals to make a way for themselves led only to systemic inequalities which led to, by the mid-nineteenth century, a demographic crisis whose consequences in terms of the exodus from the land are with us still. Later arrivals simply could not compete for scarce resources. Ironically, however, the first comers of all, the Micmac nation, saw their legitimate claims swept away without compensation whenever their lands stood in the way of settlers' interests. Both these essays are accompanied by excellent maps and diagrams and feature illuminating analyses that deserve a wider readership than they are likely to get in this volume.

The social and economic implications of industrial transformation after 1900 are addressed by Ron Crawley and Michael Owen. Crawley discusses the formation of a working class community in Sydney between 1900 and 1904, focussing on class conflict during the unsuccessful 1904 strike to organize steel plant workers under the auspices of the Provincial Workman's Association. Use of military force by company officials was, by then, already a well-developed practice in the coal fields. Now workers in the new steel plant were forced to bow before state/capitalist power without gaining recognition for their union. The 1904 strike probably marked the beginning of the end for the Workman's Association, which failed to achieve the broad industrial union it was seeking

to form. It would be two more generations before the steel workers were effectively represented by a broad-based union. Crawley demonstrates that class solidarity in industrial Cape Breton cuts deeply—in this case, embedded in the unequal relations between capital and labor as well as in inequalities among workers of different ethnic backgrounds. While the strike overrode those differences for a brief period, it failed to bring steel workers out of their fragmentation, as the newly arrived laborers jockeyed with the equally strong established workers for places within an industry which was financially and technologically troubled from its very beginnings.

Michael Owen, drawing from his broad study of the "Social Gospel" and home mission movements of the Presbyterian church, chronicles attempts to "Canadianize" non-Anglo/Celtic workers who trickled into Whitney Pier and other smaller ethnic ghettos in Cape Breton's industrial area after 1900. The efforts were designed to offer to children of recent immigrants the social services that the church felt local governments were not providing. Owen situates Sydney's experience within that of the broader urban transformation of the early twentieth century and targets similarities between Sydney's experience and that of other centres in Canada. Along the way he makes the important point that other ethnic groups besides the Anglo/Celts were to be found in the industrial area, something Crawley points out as well, though his emphasis is on migration of Newfoundlanders to the community.

John Johnson, another Fortress Louisbourg historian continues his fascination with Katharine McLennan, daughter of J. S. McLennan, a former Dominion Steel official who became publisher of the *Sydney Post* and an influential Conservative senator. McLennan's experience nursing in France during World War I provides a revealing portrait of a young bourgeois woman's transformation, after exposure to the harsh realities of life near the trenches. He draws heavily from her journals and family letters and reproduces a number of the pencil sketches she did, as well as some photographs of her experiences overseas. Her experience as the spinster daughter of wealthy parents may have typified the concerns of the idle rich to play a part in world events, but her volunteer work for the Red Cross at least showed a concern for the effects of industrialism, even if it did not question relations between capital and labor.

This stands in sharp contrast to the collection's other biographically-centred essay, by UNB historian David Frank, who has been writing about J. B. McLachlan for the past decade. Here, Frank deals with J. B.'s six different forays into electoral politics between 1917 and 1935 on behalf of various socialist parties. McLachlan's failure in these efforts was mostly a consequence of bad timing. Conflict among different socialist groups impeded the solidarity needed to produce electoral success. Frank concerns himself more with the content of the campaigns, rightly seen as one of the prime opportunities to advance the political education of Cape Breton workers to the harsh realities of the capitalist system. His analysis has much to tell us about the subsequent successes and failures of the CCF/NDP in the area.

Economist Joan Bishop analyses the establishment and failures of Sydney Steel, the crown corporation established in 1968 to manage and modernize the plant. Bishop, working largely from public documents, has pieced together the roots of the current situation, in which the industry has become a shell of its former self. Her narrative despairs over missed opportunities in dealing with a badly outdated industry within a regional economy in crisis. It is a damning critique of bungled management and timid political will in a situation where decisive action might have successfully transformed a troubled industry. Instead, hundreds of millions of dollars have been squandered on false trails which have led to ever increasing problems—altogether a depressing commentary on the shortcomings of half-hearted attempts at public stewardship which have become all too common in recent years in a number of other industries. It is also a telling analysis of the tensions between Sydney and Halifax in any question regarding the future of Cape Breton.

Taken together, these essays indicate the range of current scholarship regarding Cape Breton. Their discussion of development and underdevelopment is depressingly repetitive with regard to the shortcomings of current and past leaders. It also reflects an important opening of interest in the rural community that promises to marry the intense interest of local historians and genealogists with the analytical force of younger, professionally trained, scholars. Appended to the collection is a valuable bibliography of books and articles on Cape Breton published in the past decade.

Stephen Hornsby, who is the author of one of the essays in Donovan's collection, has recently published his University of British Columbia PhD thesis. Hornsby, who now teaches geography at the University of Maine, is from Britain, which testifies once again to the breadth of interest in Cape Breton. His thesis though is well within the mould of the Canadian historical geography tradition, which places a premium on deep description of interval data at specific moments of significant transformation. In this case, it is expanded with a reliance on a wide variety of qualitative resources, providing social analysis that incorporates a great deal of the work of a number of historians.

Hornsby describes the pattern of settlement within the context of the primarily Scottish background of those settlers who came to Cape Breton. Within the broad context of his analysis, he sets up a dichotomy of agricultural settlement and staples exploitation. The result is a book of substance which sets the Cape Breton experience within the North American context of staples development and addresses the interaction of the two elements of the population in the context of underdevelopment. As one might expect from a geographer, there is a fair amount of discussion of environmental conditions and a certain amount of discussion of the limits of the resource endowment of the Island.