

# USES AND ABUSES OF HISTORY\*

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ANYONE who has paid at all close attention to developments in Canada during the past fifteen or twenty years must have noticed that there has been a marked revival of interest in history in the Maritimes. In many ways Dr. J. C. Webster's so-called retirement from Chicago to Shediac personifies it, for he has been since 1919 a principal agent in creating the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, in making the Museum at St. John one of a very small number of regional museums in the world which reflect the history as well as the nature of their environment, and in editing and publishing much valuable historical material. Archivist D. C. Harvey of Nova Scotia provides another instance, either by reason of his excellent account of the French regime in Prince Edward Island and his many published works, or in the fruitful encouragement which he has given to the work of other students. Both of these men, particularly Dr. Webster through his achievements at Beausejour and Louisburg, have brought the past to life and memory by their yeoman services on the *Historic Sites and Monuments Board*.

There have been others at work as well. A research scholar at Columbia University published a study of how the movements for Maritime Union and Canadian Federation met and married<sup>1</sup>, and another at Toronto spent some years investigating the Loyalists, without, however, making public his findings. Let us hope that he will, if only to end our speculations. Your own University decided that it should have a separate chair of history and called to it Professor A. G. Bailey, who has followed up his remarkable book on the early interplay of Indian and European ways of life with some valuable articles on the period of Confederation, and who is at present busy on an investigation which will give us a better *idea of how the St. John Valley has come to be what it is today*. One of our present research students at Columbia University is trying to do the same sort of thing for both sides of the St. Croix Valley, American and Canadian, at once.

And then, as you know, throughout this Province the newspapers and periodicals have been giving space to the findings of such students of the local past as Professor W. B. Kerr, Miss

\*Founders' Day address at the University of New Brunswick, February 15, 1944.

1. Before 1941 there was another remarkable example at Poltava, in the Ukraine.

2. W. M. Whitelaw, *The Maritimes and Canada before Confederation* (Toronto, 1929)

Louise Manny, Mrs. Maxwell, Mrs. Vesey, and Mrs. Wright. An even wider circle of readers, all over the English-speaking world, has been reading something like the history of the Maritimes in novels. Evelyn Eaton revived the romance of the Acadians on the St. John and at Port Royal, T. H. Raddall used the dilemma of "the neutral Yankees" of Nova Scotia during the American Revolution, in the best historical novel which the Maritimes have produced; Cyril Harris, Kenneth Roberts, and others devoted their talents to the Loyalists; and Hugh MacLennan brought us all up short by his excellent novel about Halifax at the time of its great disaster during the War of 1914.

So much for the past twenty years. May I say that it was about time that there was such a revival, and add that we still have no satisfactory complete history of any of the Maritime Provinces? That, I presume, is why President MacKenzie has been using so many public occasions at this University for pleading the cause of history. At any rate, when students at my University ask for dependable histories of the Maritimes, they have to be told that there is a good treatment of this or that part of the story, but that there is no use seeking for such things as a thorough and dependable account of the Loyalist experiment, or of the New Brunswick lumber and ship-building industries, or of the Acadian and Canadian French in this Province. Where can they find out about the development of northern New Brunswick, or the respectable antiquity of the tourist business? The list of unanswerable questions could be made a long one.

You may reply "What of it?", or as one of my friends is accustomed to say "To hell with the history. What's the problem?" My response would be that the best way to solve any problem includes a lot of history, even if it is disguised. Why do you ladies choose one tradesman instead of another, and you gentlemen look searchingly into the past of your associates and employees? Why is every advance in science and technology based on the histories of innumerable past experiments and experiences? Why is the Russia or the United States of today so like what it was in 1914, in spite of all that has happened since? Actually we are all so aware of how history helps to explain things that we are strongly tempted to give up trying to think things out, and to relapse into chanting the comfortable formula: "History repeats itself". But since that escape is such a feeble one, we might better ask ourselves tonight why it is that human beings have always busied and puzzled themselves with the effort to recreate the past.

If you ask that question of the curator of any great library or collection of archives, a mad gleam will come into his eyes and he will tell you: "Because we are ancestor-worshippers". He will then submerge you in statistics of the visitors and letter-writers he had to deal with last year, each of whom was in stubborn search of the one distinguished ancestor whom his or her family tradition believed to have once existed. When you consider how many ancestors each of us has had, and how few distinguished human beings have existed, you will understand why librarians and archivists are likely to be a little misanthropic.

An answer which you may get from someone else is that the past is so quaint; in other words, you may come upon an antiquarian. Pure antiquarianism is the cherishing of objects and histories of the past *merely* because they are old, but obviously it is also frequently colored by the kind of self-satisfaction which means "Weren't they funny, or backward, or stupid, and aren't we the reverse?" The best form of antiquarianism is hardly antiquarianism at all, for it amounts to the search into the past for a beauty, in objects or in human character, which is truly timeless.

Your question may also turn up one of those bemused, although occasionally cynical, persons who explore the past in order to select from it the things and the happenings which reinforce their own imaginary and satisfying pictures of themselves, their family, their race, town, their province, and their country. This is the search for the comforting, heartening myth. An example which will be familiar to you is the student of the New Brunswick Loyalists who systematically refuses to think about the hundreds of them who went back to the United States as soon as they dared, and about why they did so.

Finally, I like to think, you ought most often to discover that people search history in order to discover how they have come to be what they are. Sometimes, of course, this quest can hardly be thought of as disinterested or dispassionate. Its object may even be nearer the character of a legal brief than that of a true history. I understand that there was some fairly frenzied historical research here in New Brunswick five or six years ago for the benefit of the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations. Interestingly enough, it seems to depend upon what part of Canada a man comes from whether he regards New Brunswick's representations to that Commission as history or as legend.

Should you ask whether history can be all of these things—

genealogy, antiquarianism, myth, explanation of the present—the answer ought to be “Yes”. History is everything and nothing. Its materials are everything that has ever happened, and yet, in many fields, it may also be little more than a way of putting some occurrences and things together so as to construct foundations for present knowledge and future actions.

For instance, it is an appalling thought that, thanks to our ability to shut our ears and minds to what is going on around us, there must be nearly as many histories of this group of persons during this meeting as there are persons here. There cannot be one of us, myself included, whose thoughts have not strayed at least once since I began to speak. A life-time would not be long enough to write the history of this gathering up to this moment in terms of all our inner and outer experiences since it began, and, if we carried the history on to what each of us while here has decided to do tomorrow and to what he actually does, it would need eternity. That seems to bring us hard up against the question as to what kind of historical enquiry is worth the trouble.

Suppose we consider again, and this time consider as a progression, the kinds of history already mentioned. The genealogist may be merely silly and vain, but if he does his work exactly and well, if he does not proceed on the principle of including great-uncle Ned because he married the fifth daughter of the second cousin of a baronet, and of leaving out great-aunt Ellen because she eloped with a horse-trader from Maine, he can do true service to others. He may, as I shall suggest later, contribute to a beneficial, sustaining myth, but in any case his researches can save the serious historian a great deal of time-consuming work. Every great library contains endless volumes of pious histories of families and small regions, which in themselves convey little or no understanding of past or present, but whose contents in skilled hands can give life and substance to broader studies and occasionally even yield insight into obscure historical processes. Recall how often illegitimate birth can help to explain the otherwise inexplicable careers of men who were mysteriously favored in obscurity or who attained fame by efforts beyond those of ordinary men.

The antiquarian can make contributions to history in the same ways. He can hearten us in present circumstances by revealing what our predecessors have undergone, and he can make real the circumstances of their lives by preserving the objects which they used. You in New Brunswick are most fortunate in

that your Provincial Museum has been brought to its present state by a succession of persons, since Gesner a century ago, who have been strongly actuated by a sense of history, whether geological history, or natural history, or social history. But not all museums are as good as yours, and some of them achieve results not intended by their founders.

The best example of the unexpected result which comes to mind is the museum at Stanford University in California. It contains all the memorable objects in the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Leland Stanford and of their son Leland Stanford Jr., even to one of the first locomotives of the Central Pacific Railroad which was the foundation of the Stanford fortune. The Stanfords had travelled widely, and had collected expensive souvenirs on the way. The University itself was opened in 1891 as a memorial or souvenir of their son, who died at seventeen. The museum was of course intended to be an agency for educating the people of California, but it became instead a monument to the Stanfords and a perfect, if unconscious, reflection of the tastes of a self-made American millionaire during the Gilded Age. One would never send a Californian student there to look at the Egyptian objects, for instance. He could do better in books or in properly constructed collections. But I cannot think of a more powerful instrument for conveying to any student an intimate sense of what the American millionaires of the great period of exploitation were like. Mark Twain, Henry James, and Theodore Dreiser would have loved it. It is Bar Harbor, Newport, old Fifth Avenue, Saratoga Springs, and Alexandria Bay rolled into one, with many a touch of "Innocents Abroad" as well.

The word "myth" used to carry with it merely the meaning of falseness. Indeed, it is only during the past generation or so that we have commonly given it broader values, thanks largely to the writings of Georges Sorel. He was a respectable member of the middle class in France, Chief Engineer of Highways and Bridges, and a member of the Legion of Honor. In 1892, at the age of 45, he turned to writing, and fourteen years later he published, in *Reflections on Violence*, one of the most influential books of our time. He died in 1922. He was essentially a moralist and a critic of both traditional liberalism and socialism. By a curious perversion, however, his book became an armory for the critics of communism, and first Italian, and then German, Fascists used its ideas as weapons, with characteristic cynicism and superficiality.

Our interest in him, however, is in his great contribution

to social theory—the idea of the “myth”. To Sorel, the motive force for moral regeneration *must* lie in a myth. “Men who are participating in a great social movement always picture their coming action as a battle in which their cause is certain to triumph” he said, thereby giving Hitler a title for his autobiography.<sup>1</sup> We need not follow him into his thesis of intuition, which has so obviously affected Hitler, or into his faith in the general strike, which played such a large part in the Russian revolutions. We need do no more than notice that, toward the end of his life, he transferred his faith from the syndicalist myth to the myths of Christianity. The point to be made here is that he has taught us to realize quite generally that we all shape our actions in the present partly in terms of myths which we have inherited from, or created about, the past. These myths are not necessarily true, in fact, they are seldom even moderately accurate, but they represent what we like to think happened, and we lovingly weave them into a garment of protection against the stormy present. No one, for instance, can write the history of New Brunswick satisfactorily if he does not deal faithfully with the living myth of the Loyalists as well as with their reality.

So far we have considered secondary or tributary kinds of historical pursuits, with the purpose of seeing what they furnish for the more searching process of discovering how the past has built up the present. Countless efforts have been made to delineate this noble and difficult kind of history, but it occurred to me that you might welcome instead tonight a portrait of “the good historian” as Dr. Stanley Pargellis recently presented it to the group of Chicago business men who form the Newcomer Society. His subject was “The Judgment of History on American Business”, and he said:

The good historian, like good non-historians, has a dual faith: he believes in the orderly continuity of society, and he believes in certain standards for human behavior, of keeping one's word, of honesty, and of fairness. As for his profession, mere accuracy in recording and arranging facts is not enough. He must do with the documents with which he works what a business man does every day with the letters that pass across his desk: ask exactly what a letter means, why it was written, how fair a statement of fact or how sound the argument in it is, what the background of it is, what is to be done with it. He cannot jump to conclusions about any of those points; he must try to know. As he follows some past situation as it develops in the documents, he must feel the attitudes and characters of every participant, know the limits

1. T. E. Hulme, translator, *Reflections on Violence*, (New York 1941) p. 21

tions, economic and intellectual, within which the situation is set and men must act, have always in the back of his mind the final outcome, and yet feel also the risks, the uncertainties, those disillusionments and the triumphs of all the actors. He must try to keep unhampered and unclouded his freedom of mind, his independence of judgment, and his imaginative ability to grasp the whole of a situation. It is difficult enough for a lawyer today, for example, to see the world as a minister or a poet sees it; it is much more difficult for him to see the world of a century ago as a minister then looked at it. The historian must constantly do that, or try to do it. He must be lawyer and minister both, politician, poet and business man. And then he must put everything that he knows together, understand an entire society as it moves through some period of past time, come to conclusions about the movements in it and why it changed as it did, and write it down sensibly enough, readably enough, to get it published and to get it read. No wonder that great historians, who can do all this, are among the rarest of human products. America has produced in its hundred and sixty-seven years as a nation many good soldiers, lawyers, novelists and business men, but few good historians."

You would agree that the professional historian, as Dr. Pargellis describes him, is a far cry from the amateur, unless the amateur adopts professional standards and can somehow find the time, energy, and money which are needed to maintain them. Nowadays most "good historians" earn their bread and butter in the arduous profession of teaching. They conduct their research and do their writing after the ordinary man's working day is over, and during the vacations which experience has taught us are necessary, if the wells of energy and inspiration, upon which good teachers must draw, are to be re-filled. We often forget how many of the great historians of the past were men of means and leisure like Gibbon and Parkman, or the holders of sinecure offices like James Mill.

Assuming then, the people of the Maritimes have shown convincingly that they want some good Maritime Province history, and also that students of history elsewhere would heartily welcome it, what shall we regard as the chief problems to be solved before the end can be achieved?

First you must catch your historian, and catch him young. The later years of high school are not too soon, but the four years before the bachelor's degree are probably best, to discover the young people who by inclination and capacity might become your historians. Stimulate their interest with prizes, as T. B. Akins used to do for his county histories at King's College in Windsor, and try to work out means by which the best work can

be put into print. Give them professors of history who will teach them the strict discipline of historical method, and who will see to it that they know how to discover and to corroborate and to use the original source materials upon which alone authentic history can be based. Draw in your professors of logic and of English, so that the students' exposition will be coherent and their expression will be both exact and winning.

Then we must resign ourselves to the fact that good history takes a lot of time and money, as well as exhaustingly hard work. For example, only some of the materials for New Brunswick history can be found in New Brunswick. The basic collection of them for the period before 1867, and much later material, are in the transcripts from European archives which are collected in the Public Archives of Canada at Ottawa. Another great collection, even for the period after New Brunswick became a separate Province in 1784, is in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, and there are valuable source materials in Maine, in Massachusetts, in the American Antiquarian Society at Worcester, the John Carter Brown Library at Providence, the Huntington Library at Pasadena, the Clements Library at Ann Arbor, and in the Library of Congress. Even if one decided that Canadian and American collections of transcripts, books and photographic copies made a trip to Europe unnecessary, he would have to cover a good deal of North America before he could write confidently and well about New Brunswick.

Perhaps this occasion justifies reference to my own experience. I have written two books of Maritime Province history on the basis of all the source materials which I could discover to exist. Each of them took all the time which I could spare from my teaching responsibilities, and most of my vacations, for about five years. The second of them covered only twenty-three years in the history of what was then the unimportant colony of Nova Scotia, and it could not have been done even in five years, if my university had not given me a half-year's leave absence, and if my colleagues had not assigned to my use, in lieu of salary, the income from a trust fund which was in their gift. And yet we shall need large numbers of detailed studies of brief periods in separate regions before anyone can confidently weave their findings together into comprehensive histories of these Provinces.

Therefore you must support your historians. They need fellowship and travel expenses so that they may both study under fresh masters and work in the great collections of source



material. It is true to say that during recent years the great American universities and the foundations established by Carnegie, Guggenheim, and Rockefeller have been doing far more than Canada has done to promote work in Canadian history. It is shocking, for instance, to think that some years ago a great American foundation provided the funds for the Royal Society of Canada fellowships in the hope that after a time Canadians would take on the responsibility, but that, in spite of the huge fortunes which had been, or were being, amassed in this Dominion at the time of the experiment, Canadians did not live up to those hopes.

Finally, you must encourage your historians by buying their books, even if you are shocked and repelled by the contrast between their true history and your cherished myths. Not that they will make any money themselves, for they ordinarily have to pay in some way or other, or to persuade someone else to find guarantees, in order to get their work into print. But if you buy histories, publishers can be persuaded that they can afford to publish more. Lending library practices should not be applied to works of scholarship. Here, of course, true history is in question, not historical briefs prepared to order and at a price, such as one notorious history of the Hydro-Electric Power Commission of Ontario. True historians can and do collect information and suggest its interpretation according to their scholarly lights, but they do not profess to be historians when they plead special causes. That is the business, and the reputable business, be it said, of lawyers and politicians.

Suppose, then, that you can find keen and industrious students, that you can train them and enable them to search out the raw materials of history which they must have, and that you are prepared to support the publication of their findings, even if you do not instinctively welcome them. What kind of end-product should be aimed at? What can make this arduous and costly enterprise worth while? Certainly not mere genealogical, antiquarian, or myth-nurturing satisfactions.

To make New Brunswick's history helpful to you and significant to others, it must be written in terms of what was going on in the rest of the world about the same time. This Province and its peoples have never been isolated or anachronistic, no matter what bad historians have told you. They have been part of the Atlantic world for four centuries, and they have been an indispensable part of the continental Dominion of Canada since 1867. Why did the late M. L. Hansen have to study New Brun-

wick history in order to be able to write his three great books on migration in North American history?<sup>1</sup> Because empty timber-ships came to New Brunswick ports bearing immigrants from the British Isles, some of whom stayed here, but more of whom trans-shipped to the American vessels which came here for gypsum and carried back deck-passengers as well. Why were the best sets of Great Lakes lumbermen's reminiscences written by New Brunswickers?<sup>2</sup> Because Isaac Stephenson and J. E. Nelligan followed the forests westward from New Brunswick through Maine, New York, and Michigan until they ended their days in Chicago and Wisconsin. Why must the student of cooperatives today come to Northern New Brunswick? Because there he is at the meeting point, the point of comparison, between the movements which have taken form in French Catholic Quebec and in Scottish and Irish Catholic Antigonish.

You might all be interested in reading the report of a conference of educators from the Maritimes and New England which the Carnegie Endowment enabled President Arthur Hauek to hold at the University of Maine in 1938.<sup>3</sup> I wish that you might also read the stenographic report of a less specialized conference, representing the same area, which the Rockefeller Foundation held at Rockland, Maine, in 1942. You would probably conclude, as those conferring concluded, that there is a distinct entity which might be called the Eastern Maritime Region, which includes most of this Province as well as most of New England and of the other Maritime Provinces. It has a recognizable common outlook which contains explicit common survivals from the past, and which reflects common attributes of the present and expectations of the future. There are marked differences within it as well, but there is, nevertheless, a perceptible over-all pattern of culture and behaviour.

The historian of New Brunswick, then, might gain an initial advantage by placing his findings and his thoughts in that broad regional framework, but he ought to cast his net still wider in order to provide setting within the rest of Canada and the United States and Europe as well. I once discovered that a famous dam built in the Trinity Alps of California by placer-miners, although

1. *The Atlantic Migration* (Cambridge, 1940), *The Merging of the Canadian and American Peoples* (New Haven, 1940), and *The Immigration in American History* (Cambridge, 1940).

2. Isaac Stephenson, *Recollections of a Long Life* (Chicago, 1915) and J. E. Nelligan, "The Life of a Lumberman", *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XIII (Madison, 1929-1930).

3. R. L. Morrow (ed.), *Educational Problems in Canadian-American Relations* (Orono, Maine, 1939).

known as "the Arkansaw Dam", was actually constructed by New Brunswickers.<sup>1</sup> New Brunswick men have been committed in death to all the world's oceans and have been buried in Canada's battle cemeteries in South Africa and wherever the Wars of 1914 and 1939 have been waged. And, if New Brunswickers have emigrated from the Province throughout its history, immigrants have continued to come in as well, whether by expansion from Quebec or by migration from Europe.

In other words, New Brunswick's history gains in significance, to New Brunswickers and to others, by every relationship which can be established with larger history. On strictly utilitarian grounds, for instance, if you know the experiments and experiences of others in other regions somewhat like your own, or in regions which are held in similar relationships. You will have the best measuring-rods for the determination of policy, whether it be road-building and afforestation, or workmen's compensation and old age pensions.

In the last analysis, perhaps the Nazis have provided the conclusive answers to our questions as to why we need good history, and why it should not be parochial or provincial. When they came to power in Germany, they systematically imprisoned or killed good historians and burned their books. As they expanded into Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and other countries, they continued to do the same thing. Their shallow creed, their corrupt mythology, and their debasement of the human values which their victims cherished, simply could not stand exposure to the yard-sticks of judgment which honest history and comparative history provide. They had to try to blot out the noble elements in their country's past; they had to try to erase or befoul the recollection of great German Jews like Heine, Mendelssohn, and Einstein; and so on, through heroes like the Czech, John Huss, or the Pole, Jan Sobieski. They had to miseducate their people into believing that Nazi Germany was the only state in the world which maintained the social legislation which we know all enlightened states have undertaken.

Myths, whether of race or of tradition, seem potent for the moment because they warm men's prejudices, but they are foundations of sand, as Italy has discovered already and as Germany and Japan are learning fast. We need something more solid to build on, whoever we are, and dependability can come only from truth, even when it is disquieting truth. Some of

<sup>1</sup> M. L. Hanson and J. B. Brebner, *The Mingling of the Canadian and American Peoples* (New Haven, 1940), p. 132.

that truth can be obtained from studying the present at home and abroad, but a little thought will convince you that the largest proportion comes from exact and understanding knowledge of the past. Call on your historians, therefore, and support them as generously as you can. Read their writings critically, but be prepared to change your notions in all honesty if you are proved wrong. Insist that they place whatever history they write within its appropriate external setting. The reward will be that you will not only know how you and your Province and your region and your country have come to be what they are, but you will also have a clear idea of how your efforts at improvement compare with what people in other parts of the world have been doing in order to cope with much the same problems as your own.