

CULTURAL ORIGINS

IN COLONIAL LIFE: Part II

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AT the very time that the Old World culture was being transplanted on this side of the Atlantic, the process of invention was creating a new type of social world far removed from the old technique of overt habit adjustment. From the middle of the eighteenth century on, the psycho-social environment has increased in importance until now it stands almost completely between man and the natural environment of life. As L. L. Bernard suggests, "environment constructed from the written document, code, and treatise, from the daily paper and magazine, now dominates our collective life. Tradition now is relatively unimportant as a psycho-social environmental control."¹

This process of changing environment was faithfully reproduced in the colonies as well as in the Old Land. But almost of necessity the institutions of the new land appeared in a varied form. For a new psychology, which has been called "the psychology of democratic individualism", was being created in the wide-open spaces of America. This was one of the levelling influences of provincial village life. It created an easy comradeship with men of all conditions, a comradeship unknown to the rigid class distinctions of the Old World. It was the progenitor of a practical race, envisioning the program of a democratic commonwealth.

As we think of the various groups that settled along the Atlantic coast, it would be difficult to imagine a more composite picture than is presented, and at first sight, it must be confessed, with very little prospect of amalgamation. But when we look below the surface we begin to notice a likeness in the midst of the racial differences. There were certain things these people held in common, and very important things they were. First of all, there was the economic motive. These settlers had come to this new land to make a living, and they were all possessed with a great land hunger. Then, in addition to this desire, there was the common impulse for a larger life. A great majority of these people had been oppressed in the lands beyond the seas, and some of them, such as the Loyalists, in this New World. Some had laboured under economic restraint, others under political or religious persecution. Hence, when the pressure was released,

¹ L. L. Bernard, "Factors basic to the Evaluation of Culture," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XXXII.

there was a common reaction toward expansion. Thus it came about that under this varied surface there ran a current of life sweeping them all toward a common goal.

We must avoid, however, the supposition that this unity conformed to any one of the racial types residing in the area. It would be more correct to say it had a composite character. There were Scotch, Loyalist, and even French influences in its make-up, and in conformity with the segregated physical area there seemed to develop a unique form of culture.

Naturally enough, then, there arose a new form of religious toleration, differing from that in the Old Land and also from that of New England. Haliburton, in his *History of Nova Scotia*, draws attention to the fact that by a law of the Province passed in 1758 it was enacted that

Protestants dissenting from the Church of England whether they be Calvinists, Lutherans, Quakers or under what denomination soever, shall have free liberty of conscience, and may erect and build meeting houses for public worship and may choose and elect ministers for the carrying on of divine service and administration of the sacraments, between their ministers and their congregations, . . . and all such dissenters shall be excused from any rates or taxes to be made or levied for the support of the established Church of England.²

This act was followed by the Quebec Act of 1774, which secured for French-Canadian Catholics the free exercise of their religion, besides certain civil laws and customs. Such concessions were regarded in the days to come as being amongst the most treasured possessions of this new provincial culture.

When we come to differentiate these cultural traits, it is rather difficult to give specific reasons for the composite character of the culture. In his *History*, Murdoch suggests that sentimental reasons account chiefly for British influence and declares that "in our Maritime Provinces we find a population so assimilated with the British, in habits and feelings, that they may be considered as identical." That may be true, for educational ideals travel far, and since sentiment is their main spring, distance does not really matter. The ideas of the Old Land could be readily transplanted in this new soil amongst a pioneering people and grow amazingly. On the other hand, where commercial interests were involved it was different. In this case strength varies inversely with the distance, and so it is not surprising to find that a culture, strongly marked on the sentimental side by its relationship with the Old Land, should on the commercial side be just as intimately connected with the New. In fact there came to be a New England tradition for commercial aggression which was characteristic of the entire continent.

2 Beamish Murdoch, *History of Nova Scotia*, Vol. III, p. 5.

There was nevertheless a greater difference in traits of culture than that which is represented by differing religious or commercial ideals, for in England and New England there were two contrasting democratic types—the one based upon individual liberty, the other upon the liberty of the group. In America the group has always been the unit. De Tocqueville, who was a keen observer of America in those early days, says that “the very essence of democratic government consists in the absolute sovereignty of the majority.”³ This idea he compares to that of the divine right of kings and maintains that the interests of the many are to be preferred to the interests of the few.

Perhaps the difference between these two ideals may best be expressed in the words “liberty” and “equality”, the former being stressed in Britain, the latter in America. To quote De Tocqueville again: “The more I advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that this equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived.” He also suggests that this attempt to emphasize liberty will surely result in inequality, for if individuals have full freedom to assert their rights, some will naturally assume greater prerogatives than others. On the other hand, insistence on equality usually means a denial of much liberty in order that all may share alike. Thus it happens that even to this day in Britain, there is a great aversion from surrendering individual rights for group satisfaction, while in America what is felt to be for the good of the group may also be assumed to be for the good of the individual. This policy is still apparent in the working out of everyday problems in life. America, for instance, repudiates aristocratic inequality but will accept an amendment to the Constitution on the basis of group welfare, while Britain accepts an aristocracy but repudiates an amendment such as, for example, Prohibition, on the ground that it interferes with the liberty of the individual. In this respect the Maritimes stand where they have always stood, namely in a midway position, modified by both opinions. We have accepted class distinctions, though in a modified form, while at the same time we have been partial observers of prohibitory legislation.

It was the Loyalist group more than any other that modified the culture, both of the colonies they left and those to which they came. Parrington thus stresses this condition:

For the first time now, the middle class was free to create a civilization after its own ideals. In rising to leadership it brought another spirit into every phase of life. Dignity and culture henceforth were to count for less, and assertiveness for more. Ways became less leisurely, and the social temper less urbane. The charm of the older aristocracy disappeared along with its indisputable evils.

3 A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 7.

Yet the total effect on the part of the Loyalists in this area was to differentiate culture in the Maritimes from that of the New England States. The cohesion that the political and ecclesiastical institutions of New England developed resulted in a similar coalescence in the Provinces and though channels of intercourse were still maintained between the two areas. The influences directing the growth and cultural development of this new colony were to be largely, henceforth, from the Old World rather than from the New.

It is well known that the physical environment of a country has a great influence on its culture. This maritime area was no exception, for its physical features affected pioneering settlement not only of the land but also of the sea. In one respect the New Englander and his northern cousin were alike, for both loved the sea. The New Englanders had been ship-builders from the beginning, and the industry assumed larger proportions during the first half of the eighteenth century. Then, after the Revolution, this industry developed with remarkable rapidity in Nova Scotia, for here as well as in New England commerce was chiefly carried on by sea. With the development of the ship-building industry, the deep sea fisheries were also established, and these, together with the small boat fisheries off the coast, formed no mean industrial undertaking. Even as late as 1870, Nova Scotia still continued to lead in this department of commercial life, her chief contribution to international trade being sailing vessels and seafaring men.

We have already referred to the fact that during this period a transformation of culture was going forward, and that the dominance of custom showed signs of breaking down while the cycle of invention was in the ascendancy. This trend could be observed not only in the realm of nature but also in that of human relationships. New institutions began to appear in this new land, and although in many cases they were transferred from the Old Land, yet in their transfer there was a re-arrangement. Thus farm life, which in the Old Land under the influence of a changing order became a capitalistic institution with landlords and tenants, developed in these northern colonies into an organization of freehold tenure. Likewise, parliamentary institutions grew up in the Old World based upon the principle of general representation, while amongst the colonials there was from the beginning the idea of local representation. In religious institutions, although there was a decided similarity in form, there was a distinct difference in spirit.

Two factors seem to have been responsible for this transformation in the colonies. First, there was a new spirit of co-operation. Previous to the introduction of capitalistic farming in the Old Country, many of the farmers had led what was practically a communistic life. Common land and the community life were the order of the day. Each village was a unit in itself, and the interests of the individual were bound up with the group. But this order of co-operation did not obtain in the colonial world. In these northern colonies co-operation became social rather than organic. Farmers were no longer units in a group in the new land, but independent individuals. No longer were they compelled to co-operate, but rather they co-operated from choice and with a view to the common welfare. Hence barn-raising bees, frolics, and such occasions, when the pioneers got together for the common welfare, were familiar occurrences in this new community life.

The other factor, which seemed to work in an opposite direction but which nevertheless did much to colour the culture of the period, was the clash of opinion. This was revealed most conspicuously in two institutions, the press and the school. In the Old Country the Press was one of the most potent influences in the development of social change. But the colonial Press even anticipated the freedom of the Press in the Old Land, inasmuch as "the passage of the Stamp Act bore heavily on the most dangerous classes of the population—newspaper publishers, pamphleteers, lawyers, bankers, and merchants. Naturally the newspapers protested, and the lawyers argued that the Stamp Act was unconstitutional."⁴ Resistance to the Stamp Act did not develop in the Maritimes as in New England, but a radical press arose, voicing the same reaction toward established privilege as characterized other colonial areas. In the first number of the *Colonial Patriot*, issued December 7, 1827, the editor, born in New England but of Loyalist stock, remarked that, "having witnessed the beneficial effects resulting from an unshackled press in Britain, we shall always advocate the same system here."⁵ Evidently such open avowal of the freedom of the press did not meet with the unqualified approval of his constituency, for in the second number of the *Patriot* we find the following editorial remark: "Before setting out with so open an avowal of our principles, we knew perfectly that the voice of slander would follow our track and that we should be charged with disloyalty or radicalism."

⁴ C. J. H. Hayes, *Political and Social History of Europe*, Vol. I, p. 328.

⁵ George Patterson, *History of the County of Piclou*, p. 376.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the *Colonial Patriot* was the conversion of Joseph Howe (another Loyalist) to liberal principles. The result of the latter's controversy with Blanchard (editor of the *Patriot*) was that Howe, editor and publisher of the *Nova Scotian*, "became a convert to the views which at that time he denounced, but in the advocacy of which he afterward became so prominent and so celebrated."⁶ The combined influence of these two men was sufficient to raise the press of the Province to a new level of efficiency, casting out the old spirit of subserviency which, in the Old Land, in the earlier days of social change, had been so noticeable, and bringing about a complete reformation, coincident with the establishment of responsible government. In the flinging off of authority and the casting aside of shams led by these men, we have the first painful but indispensable preparation for a true sovereignty taking place amongst the masses.

The spirit of conflict was also in evidence in these parts in education. At an early stage in the history of the American Colonies there broke out strife which involved the important issue of academic freedom and ecclesiastical control. This resulted in a broader base for educational institutions than any which had hitherto obtained in the Old Land. Two quotations from the records while the school question was agitating the public mind will serve to show the trend of opinion in the Provinces. In the Assembly of 1825 it was recommended "that an assessment on the whole population, according to each man's ability should be levied to provide for common schools, that the children should be taught free of charge."⁷ The measure, however, was defeated, and it was not until 1864 that the principle advocated in this act was embodied in the free school system. In the same Assembly the mover of the resolution made the following claim for education:

From what cause has it sprung that Prussia and Holland on the continent of Europe and Scotland in the United Kingdom, occupy so decided a superiority over the nations around them? How is it that the people of New England enjoy such an unquestionable pre-eminence over those of the Sister States of the Union? It has arisen from their admirable system of education.⁸

These quotations apparently indicate that the educational system of the Maritimes was influenced by English ideals in a declining way but by the New England and Scotch ideals in an increasing ratio, as culture in these parts developed on a larger basis of co-operation.

6 Patterson, *History*.

7 Beamish Murdoch, *History of Nova Scotia*, Vol. III, p. 527.

8 A. W. H. Eaton, *History of Kings County*, p. 340.

This new dynamic force in society also led to new forms of government on this side of the Atlantic, in accordance with the adjustment to new conditions and a new environment. For now that the government amongst colonials responded to the new will of the masses rather than the classes, there were many ways in which it might soften inequalities and prevent social advantages from becoming hereditary. Thus we are not surprised to find that very shortly after its inception every colony in the New World could boast of a popular assembly, elected by voters who possessed the established property qualifications. Brebner calls attention to the fact that "it is no small triumph to the determination of the American agitators in Halifax, and to the integrity of the Board of Trade, that Nova Scotia established the first representative government in what is now the Dominion of Canada, during the crisis of the Seven Years War in America."⁹ The first Assembly convened in Halifax on Monday, October 2, 1758, when nineteen members—six "squires" and thirteen gentlemen—were sworn in. It was also resolved that when twenty-five qualified electors should be settled at Pisiquid, Minas, Cobequid, or any other district that might in future be erected into a township, any one of these places should have the right to vote in the election of representatives for the Province at large.

When one compares the Old Land with the New, it will be noticed that there was a great difference both in the manner of voting and also in representation. The English member of Parliament was chosen for his seat by any constituency in the realm, while the colonies favoured a representative resident in the district he represented. Possibly this latter practice meant that the representative was too apt to consider mere local affairs and become parochial in his outlook, but in any case it undoubtedly conferred upon the whole electorate a larger measure of power than was possible under the system existing in the Old Land. This influence too was greatly intensified by the spirit of franchise in the colonies, where custom and precedent did not play so large a part in determining the privileges of the voter.

In general, then, this was the pattern of culture in this corner of the Empire. It is true there was expansion yet to come, but the foundations had been truly laid, and afterwards the superstructure could more rapidly be completed. Co-operation and conflict had both played their parts, and now the people of this area had the satisfaction of knowing that the institutions of education and government had at least been established upon

⁹ J. B. Brebner, *New England's Outpost*, p. 254.

the broadest base, and that henceforth they were to be "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Hence Nova Scotia became a northern frontier in colonial life, just as northern Canada is becoming a new frontier today. The reason, then as now, is not far to seek. It was speculative demand based upon economic pressure at the close of the Seven Years War that caused the rush northward. A reviewer writing on this subject explains this pressure:

Why did New England settlers desert old established colonies like Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, to found lonely fishing hamlets on the Atlantic Coast, and take up pioneer farms in the western part of the Province? The answer is social and economic pressure. Population was encroaching on the means of subsistence, expansion to the westward was barred by natural obstacles and hostile forces. The only outlet was towards the North—to Nova Scotia.¹⁰

Added to this pressure also was the clash of ideals. This clash was destined to come into the open in the Revolution ten years later, and may be designated broadly as a struggle between the commercial and the imperial. Unfortunately for the latter, it was largely a one-way affair, for in the Old Land colonies were then regarded largely as possessions and not as members of a commonwealth. Even as late as 1760 the Northern Colonies were regarded as an encumbrance to the Empire, and when it was a point of debate whether Canada or Guadeloupe should be the ultimate possession of Great Britain, Benjamin Franklin settled the matter by referring to the trade statistics. Thus Becker notes: "If Canada rather than Guadeloupe was kept at the close of the war it was because statesmen and economists were coming to estimate the value of colonies in terms of what they could buy, and not merely, as of old, in terms of what they could sell."¹¹

Through force of circumstances the Maritime area became a land of isolation. The American Revolution had created an imaginary but very real line to the south, while in the Canadian hinterland there has always been a race barrier which to this day has in a measure prevented a free exchange of opinion and interchange of thought. Naturally enough, this sense of aloofness to the outside world resulted in establishing in the Maritime mind one of its chief characteristics, namely the quality of independent judgement.

Isolation, however, may be regarded as a force of two dimensions. An area may be isolated in the sense that the world passes its doors, while on the other hand there may be a tendency on the part of the people of that area to travel in many quarters.

¹⁰ Archibald MacMechan, *The Dalhousie Review*, Vol. X, p. 436.

¹¹ Carl Becker, *On the Eve of Revolution*, p. 55.

And this, as a matter of fact, is the type of isolation we find in the Maritimes. Indeed, it is well nigh impossible to isolate a maritime people, and when one uses the term "maritime mind," one almost instinctively thinks of it as being, in a sense, cosmopolitan.

Possibly, then, we might describe these colonials as being of the world rather than in it. They sailed the seas, visited foreign ports, compared the institutions of other countries with their own, profiting no doubt by all these experiences yet always returning to the quiet life of their secluded hamlets along the coast. They knew the world even if the world knew not them, and out of their knowledge they built up their prosperity. Haliburton's tribute to these early settlers is particularly appropriate in designating not only their commercial progress but also the type of mind that made the progress possible: "New channels are being opened to their enterprise, distant seas are whitened with their sails, and as their position is admirably suited for intercourse with all parts of the globe, they must, ere long, exert an important influence on the world."¹²

The fusion of peoples in this area would also indicate the cosmopolitan nature of their cultural background. In such a small area there would be little room for a secluded life on the part of these various nationalities, and from force of circumstances, if for no other reason, there came to be a speedy fusion of the various racial units on the basis of a Maritime provincial life. For this was not a border community where the best and the worst elements of social life meet face to face, but rather a place where men with a common desire for a liberal life find themselves side by side possessed by a common ambition to conquer.

Accordingly, the fact that we are dealing with a maritime people would suggest that here we will find some contribution to progressive thought, for the maritime atmosphere has always been the sponsor of freedom. Hence we need not be surprised to find that responsible government was set up here in the initial stages of colonial growth. It was on this soil also that the free school became a Canadian institution, and in the Maritime Church the first native ministry in the British colonies was undertaken.¹³ All these evidences testify to the fact that the insular position of these colonies formed a suitable background for the development of liberal ideas.

¹² T. C. Haliburton, *Historical and Statistical Account of Nova Scotia*, Vol. I.

¹³ W. Gregg, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada*, p. 231.

Therefore we feel constrained to say, after a general survey of the field, that this has been a land noted for intellectual as well as material activity. Although it was not to be expected that there should be any leadership in intellectual affairs in a relatively poor country, still in the infancy of its development, severely tested by political controversies, and with a sparse population, yet it may be doubted whether there is on this continent an area of similar population with a larger number of people interested in the pursuit of learning than one will find along the shores of the North Atlantic. Probably the indebtedness of these sturdy pioneers may best be expressed in the language of Joseph Howe on the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of the landing of the Honourable Edward Cornwallis at Halifax:

As travellers trek to its source in the mountains
The stream, which far swelling expands o'er the plains,
Our hearts on this day, fondly turn to the fountains,
Whence flow the warm currents that bound in our veins.

Fortunately the work and influence of these pioneers have stood the test of time, and for what they were as well as for what they still mean to us, we honour them.