

Donald H. Clairmont

REVIEW ARTICLE:
THE BLACKS OF NOVA SCOTIA*

In 1968 Professor Henry, who previously had done research on Blacks in England and in the West Indies, briefly scouted the situation in Nova Scotia. She returned in the summer of 1969 with two graduate students each of whom was placed in a small Black community; for three months the students did "ethnographic analysis", participating in community affairs and, in an unstructured way, observing behaviour and gaining data on values and attitudes. In 1970 Professor Henry arranged for several students to return to Nova Scotia for approximately two months in order to carry out a small survey of attitudes and values among Blacks in thirteen communities spread from Digby to Sydney. On these bases Professor Henry then wrote this book which she describes as "the first intensive socio-anthropological study of a long-forgotten Canadian population". Unfortunately, the book, while fairly readable, sheds little light on the condition, past, present or future of the Nova Scotian Blacks, nor does it illuminate the ways in which the larger White society has oppressed, and continues to deprive, this Black population.

For an author on the basis of a relatively modest research effort to write an important book about a people, it would seem that there are at least four prerequisites. First, he should be aware of the works, theses and key issues advanced by informed commentators who have published previously in this field; secondly, the author should confront explicitly this literature since only by so doing will his own ideas sharpen and his analysis of data yield the maximum insights. Thirdly, the author should have a clear grasp of the social system in which the people are embedded, having an historical and comparative breadth such that (to use an expression of the literary critic, F.R. Leavis) he can "place" the phenomenon under scrutiny. Finally, the author should have a sensitivity vis-a-vis the people studied so that he can penetrate the trivia, the "front-stage" behaviour and attitudes, and illuminate for the reader the hopes, dreams, memories and contradictions of the people's ethos. Professor Henry's book fails because she falls short on all but one of the above prerequisites.

On the whole Professor Henry shows an awareness of the literature. Previous works dealing with Nova Scotian Blacks have focused primarily on the poverty and presumed backwardness of this people, describing their socio-economic conditions

Forgotten Canadians: The Blacks of Nova Scotia. By Frances Henry. Longmans Canada, 1973.

and positing a variety of explanations for their plight. Typically, social scientists have noted the constraints placed on Blacks by structural factors such as educational and occupational opportunity structures but they have not emphasized these nor have they provided insightful descriptions and analyses of how these structural constraints operate. Instead social scientists have concentrated on cultural factors, positing the presence or absence of a distinctive subculture among Nova Scotian Blacks and contending that certain cultural factors such as their religion, internal differentiation, levelling gossip or collective apathy have prevented the Blacks from overcoming the structural constraints. Generally the social scientists have been short on data and research effort but long on applying in the case of the Nova Scotian Blacks the "liberal social problems approach" common in North American studies of minorities and deprived peoples. Professor Henry's book is entirely within this conventional style. She notes the poverty and unemployment among blacks and occasionally exhibits moral outrage at their plight but her main focus is on the question of whether or not Blacks have a distinctive subculture and how aspects of their life style prevent social change.

Professor Henry's basic thesis is that the attitudes and values of Nova Scotian Blacks are "pretty much the same as the larger society's" (p. 2) and that they do not possess a distinctive subculture. The author does not advance the theory of culture and subculture nor does she develop a framework which might order the disparate data relevant to the thesis. Survey data are presented showing that the Blacks have a positive orientation towards *education* (e.g. virtually all respondents held that people should complete high school if possible), the *work ethic* (e.g. virtually all respondents disagreed with the statement that "some people say it doesn't make much sense to go out to work these days"), *occupational achievement* (e.g. respondents felt that Blacks could handle any job as well as Whites) and the *stable nuclear family* (e.g. togetherness in family life was emphasized by the Blacks surveyed). On the basis of the brief participant-observation in the two Black communities, it is reported that Black religious services are staid and conventional (i.e., cannot be characterized as having "soul") and that there is no special folk tradition among Nova Scotian Blacks. Such is the gist of the support the author marshalls for her thesis. No significant comparative data are presented concerning the attitudes and values of the "middle-class" larger society although the author endlessly reiterates her opinion that they are essentially the same as those of the Nova Scotian Blacks.

The lack of comparative data on the "middle-class", larger society, the paucity of the data on the Blacks and the ahistorical character of that data (Professor Henry has a few pages on the history of Blacks in Nova Scotia but it is an unoriginal rehash of materials already published and widely available) make questionable the confidence that she has in her main thesis. More strange, given her anthropological orientation, is her oversimplified conception of culture as basically a matter of values and aspirations. Surely identity, memories, historical consciousness and special modes of internal differentiation—all of which are found in the Nova Scotian Black community—are important aspects of culture! Professor Henry does not address herself to such considerations nor does she confront the existence, both

current and historical, of Black organizations in Nova Scotia involved in the struggle for social justice and the cultivation of a strong Black identity. One thinks of the African United Baptist Church, the Urban and Rural Life Committee, the short-lived Anglo-African Mutual Improvement and Aid Association, the sporadic Black newspapers, the organizations and churches in Cape Breton as well as contemporary organizations such as the Black United Front and the Afro-Canadian Liberation Movement. One suspects that the author's ideological commitment to the mainstream, "liberal" conception of deprived minority people (a conception which assumes consensus in society) is more important in the generation of her thesis than are the data and the analyses. This suspicion is reinforced when Professor Henry, who herself has done no research on Indians or Acadians in Nova Scotia and is apparently unaware of any such studies, confidently asserts (p. 14) that these peoples, like the Blacks, possess no distinctive subculture.

One would suppose that, since the author contends there is no distinctive Black subculture, she would focus attention on how the larger society oppresses the Blacks and denies them the opportunities necessary to realize their purportedly conventional values and aspirations. However, here again Professor Henry follows the "liberal social problem" approach which while strongly denying basic cultural differences, focuses on the specific cultural adaptation of the people rather than on the oppressive system. Without any sense of contradiction or irony, Professor Henry accordingly advances a second major thesis, namely that there are certain cultural traits among Nova Scotian Blacks whereby the people keep themselves down and come to accept their deprivation. It is reported that the values of the Blacks "also include negative sanctioning and levelling where, by exclusion and malicious gossiping, the people who are trying to override the bounds of their poverty-stricken communities are designated by the feeling summed up in the statement that: "He thinks he's better than us" (p. 6). Such levelling gossip is said to destroy "individual initiative" (p. 7) among the Blacks. Little strong data are advanced to support this contention nor is any comparison given showing that such levelling gossip is more pronounced in the tightly-knit small Black communities than in similar non-Black communities elsewhere in Nova Scotia.

While Professor Henry allows that "external influences are probably the stronger" (p. 7) she clearly posits that values internal to the Black community are important in restricting access to society's opportunity structures. Continuing with this, her second main thesis, the author suggests another Black cultural trait: "conservatism is a dominant value around which people structure their lives" (p. 98). Professor Henry uses this so-called cultural trait to ground her opinion that there is among Nova Scotian Blacks an acceptance of poverty, a lack of discontent about being poor (p. 98). Again her evidence is weak. In fact a strong case could be made from her own data that there is considerable discontent. She herself reports that in the Black communities "the concern with employment was . . . introduced into almost all conversations" (p. 93). Professor Henry apparently believes that the sociologically predictable and humanly understandable patterns of the poor occasionally denying their poverty, or emphasizing small achievements (e.g. "we have a good time", "look at the house I built") reflect a lack of discontent on their part. One is

tempted to say that she is naive, but it is perhaps wiser to see her as uncreatively boxed in by the inadequate and contradictory "liberal social problem approach" she adopts.

Professor Henry's main theses are then predictable and conventional. There is neither theoretical elaboration nor adequate marshalling of evidence. Although her data are not that good and her research effort modest in relation to the task she set herself, she would have written a better book had she explicitly confronted the previously published materials on the Nova Scotian Blacks. Her main thesis concerning the lack of a distinctive Nova Scotian Black subculture was advanced three years earlier by Clairmont and Magill in a widely circulated and often reprinted article, "Nova Scotian Blacks: Marginality In A Depressed Region". Professor Henry borrows liberally from this article and the larger monograph on the same theme published by the same authors, but she does not acknowledge these works as contributory, nor does she challenge or advance the arguments. Similarly, her second main thesis concerning Black cultural traits which reinforce poverty follows closely the work of Whitten (published in the *Canadian Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* in 1970) who discussed levelling gossip and conservatism in the Black community. No reference is made in Professor Henry's book to the Whitten article. As regards historical analysis, virtually all of Professor Henry's observations have been noted previously by Walker in his Ph.D. dissertation, yet no reference is made to Walker's work. Not only does Professor Henry not refer to the key published works on the Nova Scotian Blacks but she gives the reader the information that "there is no mention of this old Black population (Nova Scotian Blacks) in such works as Blishen et al, *Canadian Society*" (p.xiii). True enough, but why exclude professional journals and other widely circulated readers on *Canadian Society*? By not citing explicitly the work of others Professor Henry is able to pass off her work as creative, or as she says "the first intensive socioanthropological work", to the uninformed. One cannot but think that she would have pushed herself more if she had acknowledged the ideas of others. It is a pity for her as a professional and for us as readers.

The failure to grasp the larger social system in which Blacks of Nova Scotia are embedded is predictable given the approach Professor Henry has adopted and severely limits the value of her work as a descriptive account of a people. Adopting, with a slight re-arrangement, the structural marginality model of Clairmont and Magill (1970), she refers, (as they did), to racism, settlement patterns and the sluggish regional economy as variables affecting the cultural development of Blacks in Nova Scotia. Unfortunately, she does not go beyond this brief reference. There is no reference to the cultural characteristics of conventional society that serve to sustain and militate against any change in Black life-style. There is little reference to the social and ecological situation which must change if poverty and under-employment among Blacks is to decrease. In the case studies of the two Black communities, one does not get any feel for how the larger social system thwarts the aspirations and dreams of the people. Why do so few obviously needy persons in these communities actually receive municipal assistance? How does the marginal work situation of the Blacks relate to current thinking and practice concerning

economic development? These and many other critical questions are not raised by the author. Nor does she provide the reader with a sense of process and historical evolution. The latter omission is important since there is evidence suggesting that between 1900 and 1950 the gap in socio-economic conditions between Whites and Blacks in Nova Scotia widened.

All the faults referred to above could perhaps be excused if Professor Henry had exhibited a sensitivity towards the population studied. Instead of a sensitive rendering of Black hopes, dreams and contradictions, the reader is inundated with trivial, expose-type references. Thus we are told of how in one Black community it is rumoured that residents practiced customs "such as drinking water off the dead" (p. 54). In another community it is reported that "some residents . . . believe in witchcraft and the spirit world" (p. 46). We are also told that "in one case, a young man lives 'common law' with two older women, visiting them alternatively" (p. 47). On extremely flimsy grounds the author reports that Nova Scotian Blacks are characterized by "their refusal to take action—even if to petition the local authorities for better roads, water and sewage" (p.6). How Professor Henry could comfortably make such a statement in the absence of any real historical research (indeed her research is contradicted by the only in-depth study published dealing with a Black Nova Scotian community) is a mystery. While it is difficult to accept the argument that only Blacks can write sensitively about Blacks, Professor Henry's book, as well as the other works mentioned in this review, do not provide a good basis for countering that contention.

In sum, *Forgotten Canadians: The Blacks of Nova Scotia* is a disappointing book. An in-depth, comprehensive "placing" of the Nova Scotian Blacks remains to be achieved. This is one, perhaps, of the many challenges facing young Black men and women in Nova Scotia today.