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Through Local Eyes: The Promise and Problems of Place-Based History

PLACE HAS LONG PLAYED A CENTRAL ROLE in Canadians' understanding of themselves and their history. From William Lyon Mackenzie King's droll observation in 1938 that while Canada had not much (European) history it had a surfeit of geography, to the Laurentian and limited identities theses and Northrop Frye's reflections on the country's garrison mentality, Canadians have argued that where they live has mattered to how they live.¹ More recently, as the forces of modernity continue to shrink distances and homogenize place, many Canadian historians have been among those across the disciplines enthusiastically embracing what has been termed "the spatial turn."² A variety of place-based studies have emerged that explore a range of experiences in the past, using cultural constructions of space and place, for example, to understand complex hegemonic practices of liberalism or to interrogate the impact of Canada's globalizing resource industries on both local environments and people's sense and experience of place.³ Environmental historians, for instance, have been exploring the active role that the material specifics of a place – a river, or a mine, or a kind of energy – have played within and beyond themes of class, race, and gender within Canadian history.⁴ Other historians are applying techniques provided by Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to spatially organized historical datasets within the emerging field of Historical GIS, using them to detail the intimate, complex, and highly specific ways that people negotiated with each other and their particular environments in the making of history.⁵

- 1 First coined by Ramsay Cook, "Canadian Centennial Cerebrations," *International Journal* XXII, no. 1 (Autumn 1967): 659-63, "limited identities" was popularized by Maurice S. Careless in his "'Limited Identities' in Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 50, no. 1 (March 1969): 1-10. See also Alan MacEachern, "A Little Essay on Big: Towards a History of Canada's Size," in *Big Country, Big Issues: Canada's Environment, Culture and History*, ed. Nadine Klopfer and Chrisof Mauch (Munich: Rachel Carson Centre Perspectives, no. 4, 2011), pp. 6-15, <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/perspectives/2011/4/big-country-big-issues-canadas-environment-culture-and-history>.
- 2 For an introduction to the spatial turn, see Charles W.J. Withers, "Place and the 'Spatial Turn' in Geography and History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70, no. 4 (October 2000): 637-58.
- 3 See, for example, James Opp and John C. Walsh, *Placing Memory and Remembering Place in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010); Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994); Ian McKay and Robin Bates, *In the Province of History: The Making of the Public Past in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010); and Joy Parr, *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953-2003* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).
- 4 Some excellent recent examples include Jennifer Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don: An Environmental History of Toronto's Don River Valley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014); Arn Keeling and John Sandlos, "Claiming the New North: Mining and Colonialism at the Pine Point Mine, Northwest Territories, Canada," *Environment and History* 18, no. 1 (February 2012): 5-34; Liza Piper, *The Industrial Transformation of Subarctic Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009); and Daniel Macfarlane, *Negotiating a River: Canada, the US and the St. Lawrence Seaway* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).
- 5 Jennifer Bonnell and Marcel Fortin, eds., *Historical GIS in Canada* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2014).

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In light of the importance given to the lens of place within Canadian scholarship more generally, it is not surprising that three very different recent studies should highlight the local and the particular within Atlantic Canada: Stacey Wilson-Forsberg's *Getting Used to the Quiet: Immigrant Adolescents' Journey to Belonging in New Brunswick*, Robert Mennel's *Testimonies and Secrets: The Story of a Nova Scotia Family, 1844-1977*, and Gregory Kennedy's *Something of a Peasant Paradise? Comparing Rural Societies in Acadie and the Loudunais, 1604-1755*.⁶ How does place *work* in these volumes as an analytic lens? Does their focus on particular *rural* places signal a rejuvenation of rural studies, or a move to integrate rural history as an active player in the "spatial turn"?

Wilson-Forsberg's *Getting Used to the Quiet* is a contemporary sociological comparison of the ways in which immigrant youth in two different New Brunswick communities, urban Fredericton and the town of Florenceville-Bristol, experienced life in their new homes. Fredericton is a small city, provincial capital, and regional centre, with immigrants from a mix of origins, occupations, and socio-economic status, while Florenceville-Bristol is a small company town where almost all immigrants are professional middle class employees from South America who work at the town's dominant industry – McCain Foods. The research was built around her interviews with 65 immigrant youth, supplemented by a few interviews with non-immigrant youth and community members. She also observed the youth in a variety of settings, including their school and places of recreation and entertainment (parks and other people's homes) that the youth were asked to identify as being important to them.

Deeply sensitive to the individual youth's experiences, Wilson-Forsberg sets out to identify a key element in the immigrant experience generally: "*Sense of community or sense of belonging to a community* is a feeling that citizens have of belonging in a group, and the shared faith that their needs will be met by the commitment to be together" (23, emphasis in original). The author argues that this sense of belonging is central to a healthy society, and immigrants' integration into it: "The absence of a sense of community has been found to engender feelings of alienation, isolation and loneliness, while a strong sense of community has been linked to a range of positive outcomes including improved well-being, empowerment, sense of efficacy, life satisfaction, and happiness" (23). The extent to which immigrants experience a sense of community, in other words, provides a measure for the success of the immigrant experience in their new country.

If Wilson-Forsberg's focus is on the "*sense of belonging*" of those she studied, her analytical tools and her frames of reference are firmly rooted in the social sciences – particularly sociology and to some extent psychology. She explores the nature of immigrant experiences within that subset of the scholarly literature that focuses on immigration in contemporary multicultural societies in general, and

6 Stacey Wilson-Forsberg, *Getting Used to the Quiet: Immigrant Adolescents' Journey to Belonging in New Brunswick* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012); Robert Mennel, *Testimonies and Secrets: The Story of a Nova Scotia Family, 1844-1977* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013); and Gregory Kennedy, *Something of a Peasant Paradise? Comparing Rural Societies in Acadie and the Loudunais, 1604-1755* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014).

Canada in particular. In many respects her study covers well-trodden ground in terms of detailing the urban experience of recent immigrants, documenting some unsurprising co-relations between poverty, alienation, recent immigration, and visible minorities. Her focus on urban immigrant youth allows her to focus closely, and poignantly, on the racism and exclusion experienced by young people within and beyond the Fredericton high school system.

More unusually, however, her study is one of only a few that has explored differences in immigrant experience between urban and rural or small town communities in Canada. This is an unfortunate lacuna, it turns out, as she finds that urban/rural difference is a significant factor in the sense of belonging experienced by immigrant youth and their families. While Fredericton offers a range of professional services to accommodate recent immigrants and ease their transition to Canadian society, recent immigrants in that city were generally excluded from participation in the larger non-immigrant population. In both the schools and youth social networks, “immigrants and local residents do not know each other” (34) and this was a pattern replicated throughout the wider community. This is in marked contrast to youthful immigrants’ experiences in Florenceville-Bristol. There, despite (or perhaps because of?) a dearth of professional services for immigrants, youth in the smaller community felt personally recognized, accepted, and fully integrated into the community, in school and out. They actively participated with non-immigrants in a variety of organizations and informal activities, a pattern likewise replicated throughout the wider area. While many of the immigrant youth reported that “getting used to the quiet has been very difficult” (52), they reported being “seen” and “heard” – vitally important indices of community acceptance and integration (54-9) – in ways that immigrant youth in Fredericton simply were not.

While the study reiterates the familiar story of racism in Canadian cities, a key finding of this study is, indeed, the absence of racism within the smaller community under study here. Wilson-Forsberg argues that the strong cultural value of neighbourliness that prevails in the smaller community is reinforced by the increased interdependence of community members on each other in an area of few public services (such as immigration services, recreational facilities, and hospitals) and the limited number of businesses: people need each other more in small communities. She suggests, furthermore, that residents of this company town are well aware that if immigrants are not welcomed into the community, the company might consider the option of closing its Canadian operations and moving “off shore.” The absence of racism, therefore, is explained as being more than an expression of pure altruism or a feature of a better rural culture; instead, it is a result as well of small size, propinquity, and good long-term strategizing on the part of individuals who must live and work together.

Wilson-Forsberg’s conclusions cast a light on an aspect of rural and small town life that has been under-examined by Canadian historians in recent years. The majority of historical inquiry, like that within sociology, has been directed towards urbanization in Canada, rather than to the lifeways of “those who were left behind.” But even those few historians focusing on rural life have been leery of acknowledging at face value the heightened “sense of community” mourned by so many refugees from Canada’s mid-20th-century rural exodus, preferring to focus

instead on the abundant evidence of fragmentation and conflict.⁷ Indeed, academic historians have been much more comfortable either ignoring entirely claims of the heightened sense of rural community or constructing them as manifestations of the rural nostalgia so characteristic of old age or mid-20th-century sentimental antimodernism.⁸ Either way, they generally dismiss such qualitative urban/rural differences as reflecting the perspective of the beholder rather than as providing an insight into the rural practices and experiences of everyday life. There is, however, little sentimentalizing in Wilson-Forsberg's common sense conclusions: people in small towns and rural areas have more opportunities for knowing each other better individually and they might also pay disproportionately higher penalties for alienating their neighbours, most of whom, if adults, are also work colleagues. Quite simply, community works better, she suggests, where more human contact occurs.

The contrast between two places, rural Florenceville-Bristol and urban Fredericton, in terms of immigrant youth's experience underscores the common bonds holding the rural community together as well as many community members' fears for the future if new immigrants are not welcomed into their midst. But, despite its intensely local focus, there is an important sense in which this book is not about place at all. As a work of sociology, it has little interest in finding out what contributed to the particularities of place; instead, it seeks to isolate the independent variables – low population density, opportunities for personal social contact, fears that industry itself might be moved off-shore – that might indicate more generalized and predictable behaviours. The problem for historians is that place ceases to be a place, a *specific* locale, and becomes a location that shares these characteristics. While this study successfully uncovers some significant features that distinguish small-town/rural from urban life on a general level, its purpose is not to explore aspects of the history or geography of this particular rural community that might *distinguish* it from others. This is a case study, in other words, that sets out to explore some generalizable characteristics of small towns, not a local history that seeks to explore what is distinct about this particular one.

By contrast, in *Testimonies and Secrets* Robert M. Mennel provides us with a detailed study of daily life through time in one place – Crousetown, Nova Scotia. Mennel, through an accident of propinquity, came into possession of a rare and detailed two-generation diary along with copious personal papers documenting three generations of family life in the community, which, as he puts it, was “truly one of those finds of which every historian dreams” (8). The diaries span the years of the senior Crouse's early prosperity from farming and forestry in the mid-19th century, through to the province's economic diversification and decline in the 20th century. Personal papers are supplemented by the author's rigorous research into local

7 See, for example, Daniel Samson, ed., *Contested Countryside in Atlantic Canada, 1800-1950* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1994) and Royden Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside: Two Mennonite Communities and Mid-Twentieth Century Rural Disjuncture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

8 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, and McKay and Bates, *In the Province of History*, provide the most coherent analysis of this kind. Tina Loo offers a critique of this reading of homogenizing modernism in “People in the Way: Modernity, Environment, and Society on British Columbia's Arrow Lakes,” *BC Studies* 142/143 (Summer Autumn 2004): 161-91.

history and local fiction. Mennel contextualizes his primary research within the larger frameworks of local, regional, economic, social, and cultural history.

There are many successful examples of historians using individual lives to transcend the personal, where individual experience acts as a kind of extended *mot juste* that epitomizes – rather than averaging out – the experience of an entire community over time. Canadian memoirs such as Elizabeth Gaudie’s *Woman of Labrador*, Bridget Moran’s *Stoney Creek Woman: The Story of Mary John*, and Rolf Knight and Maya Koizumi’s *A Man of Our Times: The Life History of a Japanese Canadian Fisherman* spring to mind. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s celebrated *A Midwife’s Tale* is an example of a highly effective use of a personal diary as a means of understanding history through the personal experience of a very specific place in and through time.⁹ Despite Mennel’s spirited defense in the introduction of the potential of personal experience, in general, and diaries, in particular, to illuminate the past through a personal lens, this book is no Augustine’s *Confessions*. While replete with often-fascinating details about the particularities of Crousetown as seen through one family’s eyes, and long overviews of the relevant key historical themes and issues that they are intended to highlight, the book ultimately fails to bring these into a fruitful conversation with each other.

Part of the problem is the organizational structure of the book. Chapters are organized chronologically, following the history of the Crouse family from 1753, with three chapters drawing on John Will Crouse’s diary from 1871 to 1914. An explanatory “interlude” chapter draws on a variety of sources to bridge the gap between his diary and that of his grandson, Harold Eikle, whose life occupies much of the last two chapters. But, within each chapter’s large chronological framework, the author jumps from topic to topic, seemingly at random, and cites diary passages, or long quotations from other historians or fiction writers, meant to reflect an often-bewildering variety of themes. These might include (to take examples from “Chapter Three: The Family and Its World 1880-1900”) “Oxen,” “The Seasons,” “School Days,” and “Death.” While this approach might faithfully reproduce the experience of chaos, fragmentation, and dissonance that, as the author argues in the introduction, is representative of life itself, this approach makes for difficult reading. The mass of details might faithfully reproduce Crousetown life as written in these diaries – “revealing human brokenness in a world becoming intolerable” (11) – but without adequate focus and organization or coherence, they tend to overwhelm the reader instead of providing insight or meaning about a comprehensible past. As a result, the book fails to coalesce into an insightful examination of, or reflection about, place.

Incoherence within the organizational structure of the book is, unfortunately, exacerbated by the difficulty that the diary authors seem to have in clearly expressing themselves and their noted reluctance to do so around some key issues of

9 Elizabeth Gaudie, *Woman of Labrador*, introduction David Zimmerly (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1973); Bridget Moran, *Stoney Creek Woman: The Story of Mary John* (Vancouver: Arsenal Press, 1997); Rolf Knight and Maya Koizumi, *A Man of Our Times: The Life History of a Japanese Canadian Fisherman* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1976); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Mid-Wife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

interest to the author and his readers. As a result of their silences and obfuscations, Mennel is obliged to indulge in often-unconvincing speculation about, for example, John Will Crouse's sudden and late marriage to a previously unmentioned and much younger neighbour. In lieu of presenting Harold's reflections on his sexual orientation, which seem to be basically non-existent in the diaries, Mennel indulges in some rather unconvincing pseudo-psychological speculation about the remote father and the all-too-present overbearing women who, we learn, dominated Harold's childhood. The characters at the centre of the book, in sum, simply do not appear clearly enough to bear the heuristic burden they are being asked to carry. The lengthy passages from published local histories, memoirs, and fiction (particularly Ernest Buckler's *Ox Bells and Fireflies: A Memoir*¹⁰), contrast with the thin and limited portrait of this book's main characters. While the introduction articulates the historical potential of exploring personal lives, the volume does not fulfill the promise of personal histories, nor of place-based local or rural history more generally.

The final book under discussion here provides a third approach to understanding place in rural (and small town) Atlantic Canada. Acadian and French rural societies are the focus of Gregory Kennedy's *Something of a Peasant Paradise?* This award-winning, well-researched, and well-written volume compares and contrasts the rural societies of Acadie and the French region from whence, as his careful research documents, most of the original 20 Acadian families came: the Loudunais.¹¹ There is plenty of fodder here for specialists in Acadian history: Kennedy's thematically organized chapters on the natural environment, the political and military environment, the rural economy, the seigneurie, and institutions of local governance take issue with much in recent historiography.¹² As the title hints, Kennedy is generally critical of the construction of Acadia as a kind of "peasant paradise" or "republic of substance farmers" – a uniquely democratic society where people were "masters of their own destiny" as compared to Europe.

But this book is far from a mere polemic against recent Acadian scholarship or just a series of discussions of historiographical debates. While the author never loses sight of the very particular specificities of place, he argues that there are many fruitful grounds of comparison between the two rural societies: these were "two places that were well-suited for agriculture but situated on political frontiers with history of conflict; two places where the inhabitants persevered and even thrived despite difficult circumstances; two places characterized by considerable mobility within a larger zone defined by the natural environment and family networks" (12).

What emerges from the comparison is a superb micro-historical study of two rural societies, each of which has sharper clarity as a result of their juxtaposition.

10 Ernest Buckler, *Ox Bells and Fireflies: A Memoir* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968).

11 *Something of a Peasant Paradise?* received the Canadian Historical Association Clio Prize for Regional History (Atlantic) in 2015 and it was shortlisted for the Democracy 250 Atlantic Book Award for Historical Writing.

12 Specialists will want to read the book, and its footnotes, in considerable detail to follow the thorough historiographical debates contained throughout. Suffice to note here that the introduction provides a good overview of these key debates.

While the health of those in Acadie was almost certainly superior to their French counterparts (a result of much cleaner water), the scattered nature of Acadian society ensured both a weak state and lack of religious leadership that, Kennedy posits, almost certainly disadvantaged them in other respects. Acadians might have been free from taxation, he suggests, but this aspect of state non-intervention came at the cost of poor collective infrastructure and community support. Kennedy documents myriad ways in which Acadians' relative isolation and low population density disadvantaged them, providing detailed evidence to support his claims. The chapters on the "Rural Economy" and "Institutions of Local Governance," for example, while focusing on the day-to-day particularities of economy and governance, provide insights into the economic, social, and cultural problems that isolation brought to the Acadians as compared to their French counterparts. While noting a number of differences between the two societies, Kennedy provides considerable insight into relative similarities between the Old World and New World.

Kennedy's work is particularly strong in closely documenting the deleterious effects of warfare on both these respective communities. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Loudunais was plagued by war; life was short, violent, and poor as a result. Those leaving for Acadia would have been familiar with the costs of war, and some of the adaptations that were necessarily made because of it. Ironically, as Kennedy outlines in considerable detail, while wars tapered off in the 17th century Loudunais, leaving the citizens increasing healthy and wealthy, Acadians were obliged to deal for more than another century with the consequences of living at the epicentre of contested empires in the New World, including their complex and varied relations with local First Nations. As he concludes: "Can this colony, ravaged and ultimately destroyed by war, really be likened to a 'paradise' in which residents could 'master their own destiny'?" This seems like a cruel joke" (6).

This volume contributes richly to Acadian historiography, and it does much more. It makes an important contribution to the history of the Atlantic World, albeit in some negative ways. He provides evidence that confirms the "inability of the French to create a functioning empire" and emphasizes "the continuing importance of local circumstances and individual decisions," including important adaptations to the particularities of the local environment. If his study "demonstrates the limit of the Atlantic World, both as an entity of its time and as a scholarly approach," it also confirms the importance of worlds beyond each particular rural society (14). Acadians clearly benefitted from trade and employment created by the evolving Atlantic World, especially in the first half of the 18th century, just as surely as they suffered as a result of international squabbles.

Kennedy's *Something of a Peasant Paradise?* – with its focus on two localities – succeeds in illuminating the contours of rural life itself in a way Mennel and Wilson-Forsberg do not. This place-based study "works" *not* by creating a standard typology to predict what rural people will do under particular circumstances, and *not* by providing a myriad of overwhelming details about rural life over time. Instead, Kennedy realizes the promise of the spatial turn by carefully selecting areas of great significance in rural societies – family, community, governance, politics, religion, and environment – and allowing the reader to see the range of ways in which rural people responded as best they could to the world as they experienced it. The local,

the particular, and the personal provide a lens for examining the extent of their travails and the nature of their accommodations to the world as they found it. In these respects, this volume is a model of place-based micro-history for rural Canada and beyond.

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