

# “Prince Edward Island’s unique ‘brotherly love’ community”: Faith and Family, Communalism and Commerce in B. Compton Limited, 1909-1947

RUTH COMPTON BROUWER

*Imprégnée des enseignements millénaristes d’un pasteur insulaire non conformiste du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle et animée par le désir de subvenir collectivement aux besoins d’un groupe de parenté tricoté serré qui avait éprouvé des difficultés économiques à l’aube du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle, la communauté utopique B. Compton Limited, de l’Île-du-Prince-Édouard, suscita brièvement l’intérêt général dans le contexte de la Grande Crise. Un sociologue rural de passage remarqua, par exemple, l’excentricité de ses membres tout en constatant leurs liens étroits avec le tissu social insulaire. Cet article explore les origines de la communauté, les facteurs qui la gardèrent unie et les changements apportés par la guerre, qui menèrent à sa dissolution officielle en 1947.*

*Imbued with the millenarian teachings of a maverick 19th-century Island clergyman and with a desire to provide communally for a close-knit kin group that had experienced economic hardship at the dawn of the 20th century, B. Compton Limited – a utopian community on Prince Edward Island – briefly became an object of widespread interest in the context of the Depression. A visiting rural sociologist noted, for instance, its members’ eccentricity while affirming their strong ties within the Island’s social fabric. This article explores the community’s background, the factors that held it together, and the wartime changes that culminated in its formal dissolution in 1947.*

IN 1937 THE PRODUCERS OF “We the People,” a New York-based radio program, wrote to Hector D. Compton (1879-1970), the secretary-treasurer of B. Compton Limited, inviting him to address the program’s national audience. “In a world where there is so much misunderstanding and where disputes are commonplace,” the letter stated, “the story of your community with its model behaviour would serve as a powerful example to the people of America.”<sup>1</sup> The

1 Leonard L. Bass to Hector D. Compton, 4 August 1937, Hector D. Compton Collection, private collection, uncatalogued and partially dispersed (HDC Collection). The quotation in the title of this article is from Flora S. Rogers, “Brotherly Love Rules This Community,” probably a Canadian Press story from the *Guardian* (Charlottetown): “Charlottetown, June 19 [1935] (Special to *The [Halifax] Chronicle*),” HDC Collection. I am grateful to Hector’s son George H. Compton (d. 2013) and to members of his extended family for allowing me to borrow papers from this collection, principally copies of his surviving correspondence. The collection provides the

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company about which the radio producers enquired was a small utopian community imbued with the millenarian teachings of a maverick Prince Edward Island clergyman as well as a desire to provide communally for a close-knit kin group that had experienced economic hardship at the dawn of the 20th century. This article provides some background and a brief sketch of the community before turning to the circumstances that led to the New York invitation. The article outlines the factors that held the community together and the wartime changes that culminated in its formal dissolution. The break-up took place in 1947 – little more than a decade after Charlottetown journalist Flora S. Rogers had referred to “Prince Edward Island’s unique ‘brotherly love’ community” as proof that “co-operative community enterprise works.”<sup>2</sup>

In a province where local and family history are pursued with zeal and affection, knowledge of this unique communitarian undertaking has largely been lost to the historical record despite occasional attempts by Island historians to learn more about it. In *Canadians and Their Pasts*, Margaret Conrad and her colleagues report that, overall, Canadians believe that family history is the most important history. One Prince Edward Island respondent whose view they cite asked rhetorically why everyone would not view family history as the most important form of history.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, within and beyond Canada, alongside a seemingly insatiable appetite for personal genealogical research and for such popular television programs as PBS’s *Finding Your Roots*, there are frequent anecdotes by authors of family histories about relatives’ unease with the prospect of having their shared past explored and exposed. Nor is the unease confined only to those worried about bringing to view criminal ancestors and moral monsters in the family tree. Rather, it extends to matters that, as Australian historian Marjorie Theobald puts it, have now “gone completely from our moral handbook.”<sup>4</sup> It may be that this seeming paradox can be understood only by paying attention to particular cases and contexts, as I try to do in this article. In a brief conclusion I suggest possible reasons why, from the mid-20th century, former members and descendants of the Compton community so readily let their ancestors’ utopian project slip to the recesses of the family memory bank and politely turned aside outsiders’ attempts to make it known.

The article comes out of research for a larger project on the background and life of the Compton community. As well as engaging with Canadian family and religious history and the history of the Atlantic region, the project seeks to contribute to the nascent field of utopian studies in Canada. During the late 20th century in the United States there was a lively interest in such 19th-century utopian communities as

single most important primary source for this article, supplemented by information from the few people still living with personal memories of the Compton community. I am also grateful to the three anonymous reviewers of the article for wonderfully engaged and engaging comments.

2 Rogers, “Brotherly Love Rules This Community.”

3 Margaret Conrad et al., *Canadians and Their Pasts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), chap. 4 (p. 81 for PEI respondent).

4 Accounts of such unease are given in, for instance, Carolyn Abraham, *The Juggler’s Children: A Journey Into Family, Legend and the Genes That Bind Us* (Toronto: Random House, 2013); Mary Louise McCarthy, “Mixed-Race Identity Black and Maliseet: My Personal Narrative,” *Acadiensis* XLIII, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2014): 117-24; and Marjorie Theobald, *The Wealth Beneath Their Feet: A Family on the Castlemaine Goldfields* (Melbourne: Arcadia, 2010), quotation on 219.

Robert Owen's secular social experiment at New Harmony, Indiana, and John Humphrey Noyes's Perfectionist commune at Oneida, New York, as well as in better-known endeavours such as those undertaken by the Shakers, Hutterites, and Mormons. American scholars' fascination with utopias arose in the wake of the establishment across North America in the late 1960s and early 1970s of many short-lived hippie or counter-cultural communities.<sup>5</sup> Although Canada had its share of like-minded movements in this period (they seem to have been particularly salient in the Maritimes and British Columbia),<sup>6</sup> those movements did not inspire the same degree of scholarly interest in earlier utopian experiments in Canada. There have certainly been popular or scholarly accounts of individual communities, such as Sointula, a Finnish socialist group in early-20th-century British Columbia, and the religious utopias of the Prairie West.<sup>7</sup> In 2011 historian Colin M. Coates provided a brief overview of these and other Canadian utopias at a Canadian Historical Association annual meeting.<sup>8</sup> And in an ongoing project that draws on their backgrounds in, respectively, urban planning and human geography, scholars Beth Moore Milroy and Brian S. Osborne are building on the unfinished work of a deceased colleague to compile a list and briefly describe "built utopias in Canada up to 1945."<sup>9</sup> To date, however, there have been no scholarly book-length studies in English of Canadian utopias.

Like other would-be explorers of utopian communities, I have learned that attempts at definitions of such communities have been fraught with difficulties – excessively broad at one extreme and too narrowly restrictive at the other. In her introduction to *The Concept of Utopia*, Ruth Levitas, for instance, wrote that the constant in all utopias is a "desire for a better way of living and being." The introduction to a collection of essays to mark the quincentennial of Sir Thomas More's birth was similarly expansive, referring to utopianism as "a bright vision of a world where things will be far better than they are now." Writing more recently, the authors of *The Historical Dictionary of Utopianism* identified what they saw as some defining characteristics: "Utopianism, ancient or modern, has almost always been marked by the following: group-based isolation from contemporary worldly corruption, . . . equality of goods and a rejection of luxury; regimentation of the lives of the participants . . . to assure the perceived common good; and direction of the new model society being placed in the hands of leaders . . . endowed with a vision . . . that

5 Although one 1960s community is featured in John A. Hostetler's *Communitarian Societies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), the counter-cultural communities of that era are not typically included in the scholarly US literature.

6 See, for instance, Sharon Ann Weaver, "Making Place on the Canadian Periphery: Back-to-the-Land on the Gulf Islands and Cape Breton" (PhD diss. in history, University of Guelph, 2013); Andrew Scott, *The Promise of Paradise: Utopian Communities in British Columbia* (Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 1997); and Kathleen Rodgers, *Welcome to Resisterville: American Dissidents in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).

7 Scott, *Promise of Paradise*; A.W. Rasporich, "Utopia, Sect and Millennium in Western Canada, 1870-1940," *Prairie Forum* 12, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 217-43.

8 Colin M. Coates, "Is There a Canadian Utopian Tradition?" (paper presented to Canadian Historical Association Annual Meeting, Fredericton, May 2011).

9 See "Canadian Utopias Project/The Legacy of Professor Jeanne M. Wolfe," <http://canadianutopiasproject.ca>.

will bring peace and justice to all adherents within time.” There are, though, some well-known and long-existing communities commonly described as utopias, the Amish, for example, in which one or more of these characteristics is weak or absent.<sup>10</sup> Given the problematic range of meanings and approaches illustrated in the works just cited, the more limited concept of “communal utopias” seems more helpful for locating the Compton community within the broad utopian tradition.

In *America’s Communal Utopias*, Donald Pitzer writes: “In this type of close-knit community much or all property is shared communally. Members join voluntarily and live in rural settlements or urban housing partly isolated and insulated from the general society. They share an ideology and lifestyle while attempting to implement the group’s ideals.”<sup>11</sup> Certainly, communalism seems to have been an essential element in the life of B. Compton Limited. While it was founded more than half a century after what some scholars of American utopian movements have viewed as their golden age – the 1840s is often highlighted and, in terms of location, the “Burned-over District” of New York state – the Compton community shared with many communal utopias of that earlier efflorescent period a deep concern with religion and, in particular, a sense of urgency about the coming of the millennium and the importance of awaiting it as a unified body of believers.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, B. Compton Limited was also an attempt to respond practically to the earthly needs and social challenges facing a small group of kin in a quite different time and place.

### Sojourners and settlers

The ancestors of these Prince Edward Island communitarians were Loyalists and Planters. William Compton, a carpenter like his father (also a William), had come as a boy from New Jersey to New Brunswick at the end of the American Revolution. The family settled first at Saint John and then at Quaco (later called St. Martins). Young William’s marriage to Mary Vaughan linked him to a Planter family that had relocated from Nova Scotia to Quaco where, in the early 19th century, they would become important shipbuilders and ship owners.<sup>13</sup> For a time in the 1820s William

10 Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Hemel Hempstead, UK: Phillip Allan, 1990), 7; E.D.S. Sullivan, *The Utopian Vision: Seven Essays on the Quincentennial of Sir Thomas More* (San Diego: San Diego University Press, 1983), 6; James L. Morris and Andrea L. Krass, *Historical Dictionary of Utopianism* (Langham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 309. On the Amish in Canada, see Orland Gingerich, *The Amish of Canada* (Waterloo: Conrad Press, 1972) and, for a mainly US approach, see Donald B. Kraybill, ed., *The Amish and the State*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

11 Donald E. Pitzer, “Introduction,” in *America’s Communal Utopias*, ed. Donald E. Pitzer (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 5.

12 Morris and Krass, *Historical Dictionary*, xxx; Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 7; Peyton E. Richter, ed., *Utopias: Social Ideals and Communal Experiments* (Boston: Holbrook Press, 1971), 5; Michail Barkunin, *Crucible of the Millennium* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 2-3.

13 Esther Clark Wright, *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* (Fredericton: n.p., n.d. [1955]), 271, and Wright, *The Ships of St. Martin’s: Shipbuilding and a List of Vessels Built at St. Martin’s New Brunswick, 1800-1899* (Saint John: New Brunswick Museum, 1974). One of several collections of essays on the Planters is Margaret Conrad, ed., *Intimate Relations: Family and Community in Planter Nova Scotia, 1759-1800* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1995), which includes Althea

and Mary lived in Cape Breton, where William is said to have started a sawmill and a grist mill at Malagawatch.<sup>14</sup> By 1841 they had settled on Prince Edward Island at Belle River (originally called Belle Creek), in Lot 62, some 35 miles southeast of Charlottetown. Twenty-five years later, when Mary died, PEI was home to all but one of their 11 surviving children. William's death came about a year after his wife's. In addition to their sons and daughters, the couple left behind 112 grandchildren and 42 great-grandchildren.<sup>15</sup>

As residents of Belle River and the larger Belfast area these Comptons were near neighbours and sometimes marriage partners of the successful Selkirk settlers and other Gaelic-speaking Scots Presbyterians, many of whom became ardent followers of one of the Island's larger-than-life figures – the Rev. Donald McDonald (1783-1867).<sup>16</sup> Born in Scotland and trained at the University of St. Andrew's for ministry in the established Church of Scotland, McDonald began his career in Prince Edward Island in 1826. As had been the case during his two previous, and reportedly inglorious, years as a missionary preacher in Cape Breton, he came without a specific call or appointment. And he encountered little in the colony in the way of an overarching and constraining ecclesiastical structure. Indeed, the first established Church of Scotland minister to settle permanently on Prince Edward Island had arrived only three years earlier.<sup>17</sup> Given these circumstances, and the charismatic leadership style and powerful revivals that came out of his own transformative conversion experience in 1827, McDonald was able to move beyond his past reputation for drunkenness and establish what was effectively an indigenous religious movement, eventually winning the support of more than ten per cent of the colony's Protestant population (almost half of which claimed a Scottish background).<sup>18</sup> For readers familiar with the history of Maritime Presbyterianism,

Douglas's essay on the Vaughans – "Connectional History: A Gender-Related Approach to Genealogy," 54-61. Pamela Hatton Compton's unpublished genealogy on the Loyalist Comptons, prepared in the 1980s, has been a very helpful departure point for research on Compton family links. See "Compton: Bears; Grant; Hume; Sanders; Martin; Munn; MacDougall," Acc. 4289, Public Archives and Record Office, Charlottetown, PEI.

14 Undocumented family memories of their Cape Breton sojourn are supported by an article by Neil MacDonald in *Mac Talla* 3 (14 July 1894); my thanks to Pauline MacLean, Highland Village Museum, for e-mail correspondence, 22 September 2014, providing this information

15 The 1841 census for Prince Edward Island shows William Compton and three sons settled on property in Belle Creek. See also Mary Vaughan Compton's obituary, *Islander*, 30 March 1866.

16 J.M. Bumsted, "Lord Selkirk of Prince Edward Island," *Island Magazine*, no. 5 (Fall-Winter, 1978): 3-8; Susan Hornby, ed., *Belfast People: An Oral History of Belfast, Prince Edward Island* (Charlottetown: Tea Hill Press, 1992); Malcolm A. Macqueen, *Skye Pioneers and "The Island"* ([Winnipeg: Stovel, 1929]).

17 Jean M. MacLennan, *From Shore to Shore: The Life and Times of the Rev. John MacLennan of Belfast, P.E.I.* (Edinburgh: Knox Press, 1977).

18 David Weale, "The Ministry of the Revd. Donald McDonald on Prince Edward Island, 1826-67: A Case-Study Examination of the Influence and Role of Religion in a Colonial Society" (PhD diss. in history, Queen's University, Kingston, 1976); Weale, "McDonald, Donald," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online IX* (1861-1870), [www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mcdonald\\_donald\\_1763\\_1867\\_9E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mcdonald_donald_1763_1867_9E.html); Weale, "'The Minister': The Reverend Donald McDonald," *Island Magazine*, no. 3 (Fall-Winter 1977): 1-6. See also Rev. M[urdoch] Lamont, *Rev. Donald McDonald: Glimpses of His Life and Times* (Charlottetown: Murley & Garnhum, 1902). In this admiring but not wholly uncritical account, Lamont dealt with rumours that had followed McDonald from Scotland to Cape

parallels between McDonald and another headstrong and idiosyncratic Highland-born preacher of the same era, Norman McLeod, are likely to come to mind.<sup>19</sup>

William and Mary Compton may have come to know McDonald during the years when they lived in the same part of Cape Breton, as some family accounts later claimed. Whatever the case, and despite their English ethnicity and their Baptist background, they and their numerous offspring became firm disciples of McDonald and his millenarian message, an important aspect of which was the belief that his followers were part of the so-called Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.<sup>20</sup> In the years after McDonald's death in 1867, there were divisions among his followers. Some former McDonaldites eventually made their way into the newly formed and proudly national Presbyterian Church in Canada, established in 1875. Others, however, remained determinedly apart, even establishing new churches on PEI as well as a congregation of expatriate McDonaldites in Cambridge, Massachusetts.<sup>21</sup> The Comptons remained part of the McDonaldite fold. But in 1891 some of them – the group with whom we are concerned here – were consigned to outsider status as a result of another rupture (discussed below). They became a fragment of the McDonaldite remnant, and moved on to an even more separatist and anomalous religious existence as communitarians.

A second background factor in the establishment of the Compton community was rooted in material circumstances. The economic dislocation that afflicted rural areas of the Maritimes in the post-Confederation decades became part of the Compton experience. Like thousands of other Islanders, and Maritimers generally, some of these kin left the province to seek work – a few in western North America, many others in the so-called Boston states.<sup>22</sup> Leaving behind unviable family farms and underemployment or redundancy, some of the job seekers became permanent exiles. Others returned after a period of working abroad.

One of the returnees was Ben Compton, the man who became known as the founder of B. Compton Limited. When Ben came back to the Island after a few years

Breton, especially with regard to excessive drinking. Without wholly denying the rumours, Lamont suggested that they were products of rifts between the few established Church of Scotland ministers in Nova Scotia and the more numerous Seceders; see, especially, 21-7.

- 19 R. MacLean, "McLeod, Norman," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online IX*, [www.biographica.ca/en/bio/mcleod\\_norman\\_9E.html](http://www.biographica.ca/en/bio/mcleod_norman_9E.html).
- 20 Lamont, *Donald McDonald*, 235-50; Weale, "McDonald, Donald." A belief that they were "latter-day Israelites" was common currency among 19th-century Scots Presbyterians; see Denis McKim, "Boundless Dominion: Providence, Politics, and the Early Canadian Presbyterian Worldview, 1815-1875" (PhD diss. in history, University of Toronto, 2011), 206. British Israelism or Anglo-Israelism is just one variant (albeit an important one) in the long history of the myth of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. See, for instance, Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Tudor Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: The History of a Myth* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002).
- 21 J.H. Bishop, *Church of Scotland in Prince Edward Island (MacDonaldite Section)* (n.p.: n.d. [1991]).
- 22 Alan A. Brookes, "Islanders in the Boston States," *Island Magazine*, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1977): 11-15; Margaret Conrad, "Chronicles of the Exodus: Myths and Realities of Maritime Canadians in the United States, 1870-1930," in *The Northeastern Borderlands: Four Centuries of Interaction*, ed. Stephen J. Hornsby, Victor A. Konrad, and James J. Herlan (Fredericton: Canadian-American Center/University of Maine and Acadiensis Press, 1989), 97-119.

working as a carpenter in Boston in the 1890s – he may have gone there following the death of his first wife in 1897 – he reportedly had a few hundred dollars in his pocket, which he put towards the task of pulling his kin out of poverty. His relatives may not have been worse off than Islanders generally, but they included other returnees. Among these were one of his brothers and a cousin, Hector Compton's father, two family heads who after more than a decade in Manitoba and the American west had nothing more to show for their sojourning years than deep impoverishment and numerous offspring.<sup>23</sup> Here is Hector Compton's account of the start-up years under Ben's leadership as recalled for relatives many years later:

He made a start and helped us start Lobster fishing. It was hard going at the outset but we kept at it and learned a difficult business. Other cousins were invited from abroad, always coming penniless and we added more boats, ran a Cannery and besides this began to build up land or soil and Buildings. For years we each took our Shares and spent it as we pleased. A Crisis arose in 1909 and Benjamin suggested that we all leave our funds in the Bank add to it as we could and live from it, thus supporting some dependent relatives jointly etc. We all of us about ten young single men, cheerfully assented. We were standing outside a kitchen door where we chanced to meet. There was never a paper signed or a By law made.

Hector described Ben as “a great leader of men, a leader in spiritual as well as material matters,” and explained that under his guidance the group had gone ahead “financially or in the acquisition of property in miraculous speed the first dozen years.”<sup>24</sup>

Hector did not elaborate on the nature of the 1909 “Crisis” that had spurred their communitarian turn; it was perhaps just another influx of impoverished relatives from “abroad.” Nor did he refer to the source of Ben's inspiration. But it seems possible, even likely, that Ben was familiar with and inspired by the best-known utopian work of the era, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, first published in Boston in 1888. As the editor of a recent edition of Bellamy's novel observes, the book “quickly acquired cult status. Almost everyone who was interested in the so-called ‘social question’ debated the book, ‘down to the bootblacks as they s[a]t by the curbstones.”<sup>25</sup> Its influence was certainly felt in later years in western Canada on a range of utopian and progressive thinkers, including the leaders of both the Social Credit and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation movements.<sup>26</sup> Hector may well have inherited his own copy of *Looking Backward* from Ben. Years later he

23 Hector D. Compton to Helen and Peter, 11 May 1964, p. 2, HDC Collection.

24 Information about Benjamin's role, including the quotation, is from fragment of a letter by Hector D. Compton, which lacks salutation and date but is marked “P.S” [postscript], HDC Collection. In quoting from Hector's writing here and elsewhere I have generally retained his distinctive style of capitalization and punctuation.

25 Matthew Beaumont, “Introduction,” in Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, Oxford World Classics ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), vii.

26 Rasporich, “Utopia, Sect, and Millennium,” esp. 229-30, 234-5.

would lament the fact that a borrower had not returned his copy, and declared to one of his brothers that it had envisioned a system just like theirs.<sup>27</sup>

### **Living in community: work, faith, kinship, and fame**

The community was not incorporated until 1933 and then only on the advice of its lawyer and its banker. By that time its net worth was \$103,000 – a figure that included the assets of its satellite farming settlement, some 32 miles across country in Bangor near the village of Morell.<sup>28</sup> By that time, too, the company was under Hector's management. Hector had become secretary-treasurer following founder Ben's death in an accident in the company lumber mill in 1921.<sup>29</sup> Hector was no doubt the person best placed to succeed Ben by virtue of his ability, his education, and his early and substantial involvement in the community. Although his schooling had ended at about age 15, in 1894, when his family returned to PEI following their years in the West, he seems to have received a solid training in the basics during a period when they lived in Chicago. As for his initial contribution to the community, writing in the immediate wake of the dissolution process in 1948 when there was briefly some tension about allocation of assets, he stated: "At the time we Pooled all earnings in 1909, I had a boat & Fleet and a Share in Cannery to throw in, Bought 12 ½ acres of land and threw that in, had a Trade [carpenter] and kit of tools as against others who had none, had saved \$3200.00 [*sic*; perhaps \$320.00?] which later was also thrown into the common pool."<sup>30</sup>

As for the mill that took Ben's life, it employed outside labour as well as community members and was an important source of company income. The company sold off its lobster fishery and cannery in the 1920s in the face of turmoil in the industry. But its assets also included woodlots and farms for its own sustenance and for produce that it carried to markets in eastern Nova Scotia on a company-owned schooner.<sup>31</sup> Workers in a machine shop did custom work as well as maintain and in some cases build company equipment. Of most interest to outsiders was the company store. It functioned as a

27 Hector D. Compton to Bro. George, 29 November 1945, HDC Collection. In her article "Brotherly Love Rules This Community," Flora S. Rogers, whose husband, the founder of CFCY radio station in Charlottetown, also knew Hector, quoted from Bellamy's book in her article and claimed that the Comptons knew the book well.

28 James M. Compton, Bangor, and Hector D. Compton, Belle River, liquidators, to Provincial Secretary and Director of Income Tax, Charlottetown, as written 24 April 1948, and redrafted 7 June 1948, HDC Collection. The real estate of founder Ben Compton, who had died intestate in 1921 leaving young children, was evidently not part of this total. An online inflation calculator indicates that \$103,000.00 Canadian dollars in 1933 would have purchasing power of \$1,845,295.77 in 2015; see <http://www.bankofcanada.ca/rates/related/inflation-calculator/>.

29 "Death of Mr. Benjamin Compton, Victim of Mill Accident," *Guardian*, 14 March 1921.

30 Hector D. Compton, untitled statement, 3 April 1948, HDC Collection. Although Ben was the founder of the company and its acknowledged head, Hector seems to have functioned as its secretary from the outset; see Hector D. Compton to George Compton, 25 July 1964, HDC Collection.

31 Hector D. Compton, untitled statement, 3 April 1948, HDC Collection. Regarding the sale of the lobster business, see "Agreement" of 28 March 1927 signed by M.F. Riley and H.D. Compton; for the company-owned schooner see, for instance, Hector D. Compton to Dear John and All, 10 November 1932; regarding the mill and other assets, see, for instance, Hector D. Compton to Commanding Officer, Royal Canadian Navy, Halifax, 16 October 1945 – all in HDC Collection.





**Figure 1: Map of Prince Edward Island showing settlements of various sizes, including the two where families belonging to B. Compton Limited lived.**

Source: Will Flanagan, Cartographer, Department of Geography, Saint Mary's University.

general store to sell merchandise to outsiders while providing community members with goods on a no-cash, needs-based basis.<sup>32</sup> Finally, during the 1920s Hector evidently invested successfully in the stock market on the company's behalf. In his defensive 1948 statement dealing with the dissolution process, he indicated that between 1921, when Ben died, and 1929, prior to the economic downturn that heralded the Depression, the company's net worth had more than doubled, to \$142,044.00. The increase, he claimed, had come mainly from "Turnover Profits every time we exchanged a security in those years." Even with the losses that followed from "the slump of 1929," then, the company was better off than it had been in 1921.<sup>33</sup>

When Flora Rogers wrote about the company in 1935, it was supporting about 100 members in its Belle River and Bangor settlements on the strength of its varied assets.<sup>34</sup> Compton families had been living in Bangor at least since the 1870s, along with other families known to be McDonaldites.<sup>35</sup> Not all of them became part of

32 Helen Jean Champion, *Over on the Island* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1939; repr. 1946), 116-20 (includes reference to custom-made machinery); "Unique PEI Colony Makes Progress," *Guardian*, 3 January 1935.

33 Hector D. Compton, untitled statement, 3 April 1948, HDC Collection.

34 Rogers, "Brotherly Love Rules This Community." Rogers's wording does not make it clear that this figure included both the Bangor and Belle River settlements.

35 Plan of Lot 40, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the Province of Prince Edward Island* (Philadelphia: J.H. Meacham & Co., 1880; repr. 1977), 101. When McDonaldites built a new church on the Bangor Road in 1893, the contributors evidently did not include any of the Comptons who later established B. Compton Limited. A record book in the possession of the current secretary of the Bangor Free Church of Scotland contains details of the church's financing.

B. Compton Limited, but those who did lived short distances apart on farms along the Bangor Road adjacent to non-company neighbours. In Belle River, the households – five in number in 1945 – were closely grouped around the store and other communally owned buildings in a kind of oval formation.<sup>36</sup>

What was the glue that held B. Compton Limited together? Two factors bear emphasis: the religious bond among community members and intermarriage among those members. First, however, it is worth noting a factor that was significant for its absence in this community: higher education. Like most – though by no means all – of their fellow Islanders, Compton community members' schooling was confined to the local one-room school.<sup>37</sup> Literacy was evidently a norm among their 19th-century ancestors. But it appears that, as in the case of the Amish, the community's leaders may have believed that higher education would be a source of potential disruption through its introduction of "alien ideologies." Certainly that was how it appeared to Enid Charles and Sylvia Anthony, two scholars who came to know a good deal about the Compton community in the course of their research on Prince Edward Island for a 1943 article published in the journal *Rural Sociology*.<sup>38</sup>

With regard to religion, as noted earlier, the group of Comptons and related kin who began the community were the smallest and most isolated fragment of the Rev. Donald McDonald's surviving followers. Their immediate ancestors had been very much a part of the McDonaldite fold in the decades following his death in 1867. After hearing of his passing, Lydia Compton Hume, a granddaughter of William and Mary, wrote a widely circulated poem that spoke to his followers' sense of loss. Her father, John Compton, succeeded his brother-in-law George Bears in 1879 as "ministering elder" in the Belle River and Brooklyn congregations, with authority to

36 For the Bangor settlement in the 1920s, see *Cummins Atlas of Province of Prince Edward Island, Canada* (Toronto: Cummins Map Co., n.d. [c. 1928]), 86-7. Hector provided details about both settlements in Hector D. Compton to Commanding Officer, Royal Canadian Navy, Halifax, 16 October 1945, HDC Collection. The Bangor members of their community, he wrote, together owned "880 acres of best farmland and woodland," while in Belle River they had "over 300 acres of good cultivated land and over 500 acres woodlands."

37 There were certainly many Islanders whose education continued beyond these schools, allowing them to make significant contributions in Canada and the United States in such fields as education, religion, medicine, and business. Sometimes early support and encouragement had been provided at the local school. See Ian Ross Robertson, *Sir Andrew Macphail: The Life and Legacy of a Canadian Man of Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 13. Macphail's father, William, a teacher, a farmer, and a strong McDonaldite, was also a strong advocate of sound education. This and other evidence suggests that the unease about higher education within the Compton community did not derive in any direct way from the Rev. Donald McDonald's doctrines.

38 Enid Charles and Sylvia Anthony, "The Community and the Family in Prince Edward Island," *Rural Sociology* 3, no. 1 (1943): 37-51, esp. 46 for "alien ideologies." Interestingly, however, Enid Charles that same year commented that within the Compton community the "level of culture and of comfort is higher than that of their neighbours"; see "The Trend of Fertility in Prince Edward Island," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 8, no. 2 (May 1943): 240. Regarding the Amish, see Kraybill, *Amish and the State*, 8, 102-3, and Gingerich, *Amish of Canada*, 133. Ira Mandelker believes that the Oneida Community was undermined by its founder's decision to allow some young community members to attend Harvard and Yale universities, since they returned with disruptive ideas; see Mandelker, *Religion, Society, and Utopia*, 20.

baptize and to preside over communion services.<sup>39</sup> It was as ministering elder rather than farmer that 78-year-old John was identified under occupation in the 1891 census. But in that same year a theological split involving charges of “heresy” separated him and some close relatives from other McDonaldites. In his account of the dispute, over which he seems to have presided, Ewen Lamont, the stern Gaelic-speaking elder who was one of McDonald’s earliest and most zealous followers, denounced those “intending communicants” – they went unnamed – whose views of divine judgement were so lax as to hold that “no portion of the human race was to be consigned to endless misery, let them be ever so wicked in this world.”<sup>40</sup>

John Compton, no longer an elder, suffered a stroke and died in 1901. As a result of the split, the “heretical” Comptons had no church building, minister, or elders of their own nor baptism or communion services. Their marriages were properly solemnized, but otherwise they did without the services of clergy and conducted home-based, Bible-focused worship under the leadership of some of the community men. They seem to have eschewed the flamboyant physical expressions of religious transport that had been noteworthy and much-mocked features of McDonald’s revivals – known locally as (among other things) “taking the work.”<sup>41</sup> But they remained strongly attached to the lengthy hymns written by McDonald and his elders, many of which used vivid Biblical metaphors to express the McDonaldites’ millennial expectations; and, still reflecting those expectations, they saw themselves as descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel with, perhaps, a crucial role to play

39 Bishop, *Church of Scotland in Prince Edward Island*: Lydia Compton Hume’s poem (76-7), and brief references to John Compton and other elders and theological disputes among them in the years following McDonald’s death (14, 21-2). I am most grateful to Dr. David Weale for lending me his handwritten copy of a McDonaldite Minute Book loaned to him by Nathan Bears in 1972 when Weale was writing his doctoral thesis on McDonald. The Minute Book provides rich detail about meetings and decisions concerning the Brooklyn and Belle River congregations between December 1867 and June 1885, after which there are no further entries except for a brief account of a meeting in June 1903.

40 Ewen Lamont, *A Biographical Sketch of the Late Rev. Donald McDonald (1783-1867)* (Charlottetown: John Coombs, 1892), Appendix, pp. 42-3. In his later and longer biography of McDonald (see note 19), Murdock Lamont reprinted part of his late father’s account of divisions following McDonald’s death but prudently left out details of this controversy (253-60). Writing in old age about the theological disputes that had involved his immediate kin – elder John was his grandfather – Hector focused on events in the preceding decade rather than this controversy. But the central issue seems to have been the same: a perceived laxity in his people’s views about who could be saved; see Hector D. Compton to Peter and Helen, 11 May 1964, and Hector D. Compton, “P.P.S to Emma,” n.d., HDC Collection. Variations of disputes such as this were playing out in this period among numerous groups of evangelical Protestants in other parts of North America; see, for example, Benjamin L. Hartley, *Evangelicals at a Crossroads: Revivalism and Social Reform in Boston, 1860-1910* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2011), 24. Denis McKim suggests, however, in “Boundless Dominion” that Presbyterians were particularly noteworthy for their fractiousness over matters of doctrine.

41 See M. Lamont, *Rev. Donald McDonald*, chap. X, “The Involuntary Motions,” for Murdock Lamont’s attempt to put such phenomena into a broad historical and even global context. For a valuable first-hand account of an 1871 McDonaldite service over which he presided and which was marked by dramatic performative outbursts from “perhaps thirty or forty” of the four hundred communicants present, see the Rev. George Monro Grant’s letter to his wife, as quoted in William Lawson Grant and Frederick Hamilton, *Principal Grant* (Toronto: Morang and Co., 1904), 126-7.

in the second coming of Christ.<sup>42</sup> It bears emphasizing that references to “they” in this discussion of the community’s religious beliefs should be followed by an acknowledgement that for much of this period it was perhaps Hector who held to these beliefs most strongly. And notwithstanding the fact that his people had effectively been driven out of the larger McDonalдите group, Hector seems to have regarded his community as the fragment of the movement that most authentically carried forward McDonald’s millennial hopes and his zeal for religious liberty untrammelled by institutional arrangements.

Like groups such as the Quakers and the Amish historically, but to a greater extent, the Compton community practised endogamy.<sup>43</sup> Cousin marriage was the norm. Instances of cousin marriage had certainly taken place among Comptons prior to the formation of the community, as it had elsewhere in the 19th-century Anglo-Protestant world, and cousin marriage was still for the most part neither rare nor controversial for much of the 19th century. First cousins Charles and Emma Darwin, for instance, were only following a well-established Darwin/Wedgwood family tradition when they married in 1839, the year before Queen Victoria married her first cousin Prince Albert.<sup>44</sup> Closer to home, in the late 1800s, teacher and soon-to-be-famous author Lucy Maud Montgomery was briefly engaged to her cousin Ed Simpson, whose Cavendish people, like families in other rural Island settlements, had long intermarried.<sup>45</sup> By the late 19th century, however, scientific thinking about the potential risks of close conjugal blood ties was changing. As Adam Kuper writes in *Incest and Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England*, by the 1920s even cousin marriage was being “routinely condemned” by eugenicists.<sup>46</sup> For the sake of internal unity, then, as well as perhaps for reasons somehow linked to their religious beliefs, the Compton community in the early 20th century was perpetuating a practice that was becoming anomalous.

This did not, though, put the group beyond the pale. In contrast to such 19th-century American utopian groups as the Oneida Community and the Mormons, whose distinctive religious and marital practices put them well outside the societal

42 Well after the Compton community had ceased to exist, some kin, puzzling over their ancestors’ practice of intermarriage, thought perhaps it had been linked to a belief that Jesus would be born again into their community. In “Dear People/Belle River & Bangor,” written from Boston, 26 December 1936, Hector appears to be alluding to some such belief; see HDC Collection.

43 Because they had much larger faith groups to draw upon for partners, Quakers and Amish could marry fellow believers without routinely risking forbidden degrees of consanguinity.

44 Adam Kuper, “Introduction,” in Kuper, *Incest and Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

45 Mary Henley Rubio, *Lucy Maud Montgomery: The Gift of Wings* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2008), 87-94; Harold H. Simpson, *Cavendish: Its History Its People* (Amherst, NS: Harold H. Simpson and Associates, 1973).

46 Kuper, *Incest and Influence*, 249. In the US, Kuper writes, from the mid-19th century some states began banning first-cousin marriage notwithstanding the “slapdash methodology” behind the studies on which their legislation was based. Likewise, there were moves to ban “miscegenation” (248-9). Among the issues in the US considered as possible outcomes of consanguineous marriages was not just the matter of potential birth defects but also possible effects on the birth rate and the proportion of the sexes at birth; see George B. Louis Arner, “Consanguineous Marriages in the American Population” (PhD diss. in political science, Columbia University, 1908), 5.

mainstream,<sup>47</sup> the Compton community was not subjected to legal pressures or social hostility for its unorthodox way of life – quite the contrary.<sup>48</sup> As Enid Charles and Sylvia Anthony observed in 1943 in their article in *Rural Sociology*:

Their leader is also regarded as a leader in the Belle River neighbourhood and is consulted on all points of communal action. The general attitude of Belle River to its eccentric group is one of respect and affection, combined with tolerance of differences in behaviour. A contributory factor to this tolerance is that the group is in no sense alien. Its members have relatives in the neighbourhood. They adhere formally to a variety of Protestantism which was the religion of some of the founders of the Island, and their outstanding characteristics, though expressed in a different way, are those which the ordinary Island citizen most respects.<sup>49</sup>

Charles, the lead author of the article, was a pioneer demographer, socialist, and feminist, a Cambridge-educated scholar whose career path briefly included the Dominion Bureau of Statistics.<sup>50</sup> It is possible that Charles's socialist leanings as well as her concern about fertility decline made her unusually sympathetic to the Compton community, whose average family size she reported to be "even higher than the large Belle River average." Charles and Anthony certainly knew about the community's practice of intermarriage. But it is unlikely that they or perhaps even near neighbours were familiar with intra-community gossip about more troubling sexual irregularities, particularly those involving two brothers born in the mid-19th century who were said to have fathered children with their wives' close kin.<sup>51</sup>

Goodwill and admiration for the community was a common, even dominant, theme in media coverage of its way of life. Such coverage began on the Island in the mid-1930s and was picked up and carried forward in the English-language press in and beyond North America over the next half decade. In addition to the emphasis on "brotherly love" and "model behaviour" in the community (as quoted in the title and the introductory paragraph of this article), the other persistent emphasis in coverage

47 Both these groups figure prominently and frequently in studies of American utopias. See, for instance, Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias – the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), and Pitzer, *America's Communal Utopias*.

48 In "*A Peculiar People*": *Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), J. Spencer Fluhman "charts how Mormonism was defamed and defined as a nineteenth-century American religion." His book argues that "through condemnation of what Mormonism was, Protestants defined just what American religion could be" (9).

49 Charles and Anthony, "Community and the Family," 46.

50 Sylvia Wargon, "Legacy of Enid Charles, 1894-1972," *Canadian Studies in Population* 32, no. 2 (2005): 137-53. Enid Charles's book, *The Twilight of Parenthood* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1934), dealt with her concern about fertility decline.

51 Charles and Anthony, "Community and the Family," 46. Speculation about the sexual excesses of these two men and the likelihood that in a later generation their transgressions had resulted in two cases of inadvertent incest persisted among some older community descendants into the early 21st century.

of the community was its prosperity. Here, for instance, is travel writer Helen Jean Champion in 1939 after visiting the Belle River settlement:

The houses were large, fine-looking buildings. The barns were barns – par excellence. They were large, with high substantial foundations, and were all made from the same general pattern. We found later that it was quite easy to tell if a family were communistic. Just look at their barns! . . . All the houses have running water supplied by underground piping and are equipped with radios. The houses and stables have electric lights from power supplied by the mill.<sup>52</sup>

Two interrelated factors merit emphasis in connection with this kind of media coverage: it was by no means rigorous investigative journalism, and it reflected the kind of wishful thinking to which the Depression gave rise. It is worth recalling that it was also during this period that would-be social reformers from the US and elsewhere descended on the Maritimes to investigate the strategies of the Antigonish Movement, launched by Catholic social activists at St. Francis Xavier University, and the related but autonomous cooperative movement on PEI.<sup>53</sup> Like the private citizens who wrote to secretary-treasurer Hector Compton asking how they could join his community, journalists and other enquirers wanted to believe in and share hopeful, feel-good stories about places and ways of life that transcended the failures of the capitalist system.<sup>54</sup> And perhaps the fact that this particular story was set on a tiny island far away from the North American mainstream, and far behind in what PEI cooperative movement leader John Croteau referred to as the province’s “social evolution,” made it all the more attractive.<sup>55</sup>

This is not to say that there was no substance to the positive descriptions of B. Compton Limited. One 1936 piece on the smaller of the company’s two settlements, published in a Prince Edward Island agricultural paper, admittedly contained such wild exaggerations and outright fictions that it was almost certainly written without the author ever having visited the settlement. But other accounts

52 Champion, *Over on the Island*, 117.

53 J. T. Croteau, *Cradled in the Waves: The Story of a People’s Co-operative Achievement in Economic Betterment on Prince Edward Island, Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1951), chap. I. I am grateful to John Reid for drawing this book to my attention. See also Marion Bruce and Elizabeth Cran, *Working Together: Two Centuries of Co-operatives on Prince Edward Island* (Charlottetown: Island Studies Press, 2004), esp. chap. 4.

54 Champion, *Over on the Island*, 118; Hector D. Compton to Helen and Peter, 11 May 1964, HDC Collection. In the letter Hector stated that there had been about 40 mail enquiries and that references to the community had appeared in the English-speaking press as far away as England and New Zealand.

55 Croteau, *Cradled in the Waves*, 10. As a young economist who came from New England to PEI in 1933 to teach, and who then worked for 13 years with the Island’s mainly Catholic-supported cooperative movement, Croteau visited numerous impoverished fishing and farming communities and was well placed to observe the changes that took place during that period. But “the constant increase in governmental function” to which he referred evidently did not extend to social services for needy families, as is indicated in note 58 below.

combined reasonably accurate details with images filtered through rose-coloured glasses.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, demographer Charles and her co-author were in substantial agreement with the journalists in terms of substantive matters: the two scholars assured their readers that in the Compton community a “communal way of life” had in fact resulted in “an impressive picture of prosperity” and in “ideals of social obligation” that extended beyond the group’s own membership.<sup>57</sup> Their picture accords with memories shared by now-elderly descendants of a community whose way of life shielded its members from the worst hardships of PEI’s Depression years and predisposed them to help their less-fortunate neighbours.<sup>58</sup>

### The road to dissolution

In *Commitment and Community*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s criterion for classifying a utopian community as a success was that it must have lasted for at least 25 years.<sup>59</sup> By this standard the Compton community was successful, lasting almost 40 years. Nevertheless, there were vulnerabilities and challenges within the community even before it encountered the stresses of the Second World War era. Contrary to the images of egalitarianism and equality of condition that prevailed in print media, there were differences in the degree of prosperity existing in the community’s two settlements and even among households within them. None of the homes in Bangor, for instance, had electricity, and the homes in either settlement were not all alike in amenities. In regard to leadership, Hector certainly provided stable and skilful direction as the company’s secretary-treasurer as well as firm, faith-based spiritual guidance. But J., the man who became leader of the smaller settlement in 1923, and who was, nominally, at least, the spiritual leader of both groups, was something of a loose cannon.<sup>60</sup> The year 1936 was unquestionably an *annus horribilis* for the community: the deaths of three productive members within a few months of one another robbed the small group of valuable male contributors in the prime of life. Alcohol use was excessive among some male community members, including J., as it was on the Island overall, provincial prohibition notwithstanding.<sup>61</sup> While Hector

56 “Some Interesting Sidelights on Co-operative Experiment in Prince Edward Island,” *Prince Edward Island Agriculturalist*, 6 February 1936; “Unique PEI colony makes PROGRESS,” *Guardian*, 3 January 1935; Flora S. Rogers, “Brotherly Love Rules This Community.”

57 Charles and Anthony, “Community and the Family,” 46.

58 As Edward MacDonald makes clear in *If You’re Stronghearted* (chap. 4 and 5), such social and health problems as child malnutrition and tuberculosis were widespread on the Island even before the Depression, exacerbated by Islanders’ reluctance to be taxed for state social services. In this context even modest help from relatively more prosperous neighbours and from religious organizations was important. Regarding the latter see Heidi MacDonald, “Doing More With Less: The Sisters of St. Martha (PEI) Diminish the Impact of the Great Depression,” *Acadiensis* XXXIII, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 21-46.

59 Kanter, *Commitment and Community*, 245. For critical discussion of longevity as a standard for measuring the success or failure of utopian experiments see, for instance, Ira L. Mandelker, Introduction, in *Religion, Society, and Utopias in Nineteenth-Century America* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), and Pitzer, *America’s Communal Utopias*, 12-13.

60 Hector D. Compton to son George Compton, 25 July 1964, HDC Collection.

61 Edward Whitcomb, *A Short History of Prince Edward Island* (Ottawa: From Sea to Sea Enterprises, 2010), 40; MacDonald, *If You’re Stronghearted*, 60, 143, 237. Whitcomb writes that for a time PEI had the highest rates of alcoholism in Canada.

personally railed against the harmful effects on his community of what he called “delusive alcohol,”<sup>62</sup> it does not appear that there were ever any formal sanctions against its use as there were in some other communal groups such as the Mormons and, in western Canada, the Doukhobors and the Finns at Sointula.<sup>63</sup>

Inevitably, too, there were community members who longed for broader horizons and greater personal freedom than could be found in their Island utopia. Higher education may have been absent, but there were radios, newspapers and, in time, the *Reader's Digest* to give members a window on a larger world.<sup>64</sup> The restless included some community women. Among them was M., a young woman who evidently became the family drudge in the years after her mother's death. When on one occasion M. dared to attend the local church, her father arrived, threw open its doors, and ordered her to leave. Finally, denied the opportunity to take nurses' training, M. fled from Bangor to Boston, where she met and married a fellow Islander. Later, as a hardworking widow, M. took great pride in the fact that both her sons had graduated from elite universities and become successful lawyers. Beginning in the early 1930s, when the eldest daughter of the community's founder married a Danish immigrant employed by B. Compton Limited, there were also marriages out by members who remained in the Belle River neighbourhood. Finally, even on the matter of religion and even in the 1930s, Hector sometimes found it a struggle to bring community members together for Sunday evening worship.

The war years exacerbated pre-existing problems and tensions by exposing the community to increasing pressures from the outside world. Prince Edward Island experienced a markedly higher level of military enlistment than it had in the First World War. For B. Compton Limited the wartime manpower drain involved both hired mill labourers and young community members; among them was the only son of founder Ben, who was Hector's right-hand man in the store and in the overall management of the company's business.<sup>65</sup> His absence coincided with the existence of an unprecedented degree of government intervention in business affairs, intervention that even a small communal group could not escape. Hence this complaint from Hector in 1941 to another young kinsman serving overseas:

We are this year, since May 1<sup>st</sup> under Sales Tax regulations, accounting each month for 8% of all Taxable sales, then we now have Unemp. Insurance with a separate book for each hired man and the buying of Stamps and accounting for every days work. . . . Then we still have to “induce” them to continue contrib. to Wars Savings and mail a lot of Reports to Ottawa. . . . We now learn that

62 Hector D. Compton, “Compton Genealogy,” 16 December 1964, HDC Collection.

63 Rasporich, “Utopia, Sect, and Millennium.”

64 Rogers, “Brotherly Love Rules This Community”; Charles and Anthony, “Community and the Family,” 46. As a conservative publication that took a stand against both alcohol and atheistic communism, the *Reader's Digest*, which began in 1922, would have been an acceptable source of reading material in Hector's eyes.

65 In 1945 Hector wrote to navy officials seeking the young man's early release from service; see Hector D. Compton to Commanding Officer, Royal Canadian Navy, Halifax, 16 October 1945, HDC Collection.



we have got to get out License as Food Dealers get a Sign in our window and account as to Quantities and Prices charged.<sup>66</sup>

As the company's secretary-treasurer, Hector was the person most responsible for carrying these burdens. They came at a time when he was increasingly absorbed by what he took to be clear signs that the millennium was imminent (a perspective shared by many contemporary American prophecy writers).<sup>67</sup> Together, these business and religious elements in Hector's wartime life created stress-related health problems and made him a more impatient and judgmental leader. In both settlements, but particularly in Belle River, he despaired over what he took to be moral and spiritual declension, especially among the younger generation. Thus, in 1944 he wrote that he was

gravely concerned for the welfare of this small lot of people. We were once a body, united by a living prospect, and now that this prospect is unfolding, we should still be a unit, be watching and waiting the outcome, but it is far from being the case. . . . The Greatest World Crisis is just ahead of us when the present Babylonian systems are due to fall. [But] our children have somehow lost ear for these subjects and do not fear to move out and drink of the world's cheap pleasures. They are as lambs among wolves, far worse off than worldlings who were always inured to their lot.<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile, in Bangor, the smaller settlement, there was a growing inclination to dissolve the communal business relationship with the Belle River kin. After the death of J. in 1944 following a protracted and debilitating illness – he had, as noted, been the nominal spiritual leader of both settlements – there would have been less pressure to continue the relationship.<sup>69</sup> There was also less practical advantage to doing so following the loss by fire in 1942 of the lumber mill at Belle River that had been a mainstay of B. Compton Limited's earning power.<sup>70</sup> Calls for the partial, and then total, dissolution of the company evidently came from those operating the four Bangor farms. Writing in 1946, Hector seemed resigned to the separation and independence of this smaller group. But breaking up the communal operation at Belle River was a different matter – something he regarded as “mad or impossible,” even shameful, particularly at a time when provincial civil servants were said to be looking at B. Compton Limited's communal setup as a possible model for veterans returning from military service to farm but unable to purchase the expensive equipment necessary for successful modern agriculture except on some sort of cooperative basis.<sup>71</sup>

66 Hector D. Compton to “Dear Laddie,” 28 September 1941, HDC Collection.

67 Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 10, 112.

68 Hector D. Compton to “Dear Cousin Belle,” 13 December 1944, HDC Collection.

69 Hector D. Compton to son George Compton, 25 July 1964, recalling the “better part” of J. as well as his frailties, illness, and death; see HDC Collection.

70 Hector D. Compton to “Dear Bro. George” Compton, 28 July 1942, HDC Collection.

71 HDC to “Dear Bro. George,” 3 April 1946, and to “Dear Bro. Jas. and All,” 16 April 1946, both in HDC Collection. W.R. Shaw, provincial deputy minister of agriculture and a future premier,

Nevertheless, Hector came to accept the inevitability of dissolution even for the Belle River settlement. Several male kinsmen were emulating other young Islanders and leaving the province for greener pastures, and even among those who remained there was no reasonable prospect of capable new leadership emerging to take over the load he had carried for more than a quarter century.<sup>72</sup> While he was momentarily hurt by and defensive about what he perceived as criticisms of his decades-long management of the company and his own family's share in the division of its assets, he ultimately dealt with the complex legal requirements and personal negotiations involved in the dissolution process with what appears to have been remarkable fairness and flexibility. Writing to provincial government officials in 1948 in regard to legal aspects of that process, he explained that circumstances connected with the community's incorporation as a limited joint stock company in 1933 were now creating difficulties. When asked, unexpectedly, to name their shareholders, "we . . . gave the names of TwentyTwo 'Active Senior Members.' . . . To ourselves this was a mere legal formality and the whole thing belonged to the whole People." Some of those named had since died; other still-living and hard-working contributors had not been listed as members. In these circumstances, adhering to the usual regulations about transferring the assets of a limited joint-stock company only to named shareholders would "work great injustices" and stand in the way of "apportion[ing] things on the basis of merit and of need." Furthermore, he stated that "even without any legal handicap an equitable distribution presents a mass of problems. We have persons of all ages and of various degrees of ability and responsibility. Some young men can take a farm and run it. Other workers are dependent upon living in and working with some established home. No two of the Homes are conditioned quite alike. Since our paper Securities . . . have been sold and our money about used up, the balancing must be done with Real Property which is less easily distributed."<sup>73</sup>

By the time Hector wrote about these dissolution difficulties to government officials, the "Winding Up Notice" had already been publicly advertised. At the end of 1947, a few weeks after the notice appeared, B. Compton Limited had ceased to exist.<sup>74</sup> Prince

had been serving on a regional committee for the resettlement of returned service men. He had written to Hector, enclosing a 1935 article about the company from the *Toronto Star* and asking for further information about its structure and operation. Hector later met with Shaw and gave him further information about the company. Accounts of Shaw's interest are provided in both these letters.

72 Hector D. Compton to "Dear Bro. George," 6 September 1946, as well as an undated letter fragment from same period dealing in part with internal discord over company equipment or vehicles among younger male members; see HDC Collection.

73 See untitled statement by Hector D. Compton, 3 April 1948, for Hector's response to perceived criticisms; and, for the account of dissolution difficulties, James M. Compton, Bangor, and Hector D. Compton, Belle River, liquidators, to Provincial Secretary and Director of Income Tax, Charlottetown, 24 April 1948, and as "Rewritten June 7, 1948." Although these two drafts are very similar, the rewritten draft, from which I have quoted, bears Hector's signature and refers to a 7 August 1947 meeting in which the decision was taken to wind up the company and appoint liquidators. "Summary of Allotments From Assets of B. Compton Limited," 8 June 1948, indicates that while Hector's family's share was the largest in Belle River, two Bangor households were to receive larger amounts. All documents cited are in HDC Collection.

74 James M. Compton and Hector D. Compton to Provincial Secretary & Director of Income Tax, as drafted 24 April 1948 and rewritten 7 June 1948, HDC Collection. Although James M. Compton,

Edward Island's "unique 'brotherly love' community" was history. In the end, Hector may have felt a sense of relief. Freed at last of business responsibilities, he lived on into his 91st year. In this post-community phase of his life, he regularly contributed money to and corresponded with millenarian groups, particularly in the US, where a new and influential generation of prophetic voices was being heard.<sup>75</sup> If he was unique among former community members in being deeply preoccupied with eschatology, he nonetheless enjoyed the abiding respect of relatives in both settlements and, as long as he lived, provided something of a bond between them.

## Conclusion

As much recent scholarship has shown, forms of globalization and transnationalism were transformative personal and societal phenomena long before the terms themselves became common currency.<sup>76</sup> The experience of the people introduced in this article illustrates the extent to which religious currents and diverse ideologies could, like material and human cargoes, travel across the Atlantic and across international borders in the centuries preceding our own. As Linda Colley observes in *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History*: "Adopting a purely abstract approach to changes and influences that transcend continents means that we understand them only imperfectly . . . there is always a human and individual dimension."<sup>77</sup> This article, concerned as it is with the "human and individual dimension," also shows the extent to which transported ideas were subject to adaptation and change through their encounters with local cultures and even particular families. In Prince Edward Island the Rev. Donald McDonald created an indigenous religious movement out of evangelical Protestant ideas that were making their way across the English-speaking world during the 19th century.<sup>78</sup> The Compton community, in turn, made something distinctively its own out of the McDonaldite movement by combining it with a utopian vision. Such visions had had widespread currency in 19th-century North America, and then, as the century ended, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* had provided a uniquely detailed and attractive utopian blueprint. Bellamy's elaborate literary construct was one in which the communitarian Comptons found cooperative values and millennial hopes consonant

a brother of Hector, is shown here as co-liquidator, the details of calculating division of assets, completing income tax, and succession duty reports was the work of Hector, who was later paid for his labours by those who had been former shareholders in B. Compton Limited. See "Minutes of Meeting," 17 March 1950, HDC Collection.

75 Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*; Hutchinson and Wolffe, *Short History of Global Evangelicalism*, esp. chap. 7.

76 For very different examples of such scholarship dealing, respectively, with the 17th, 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, see Timothy Brooke, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (Toronto: Viking, 2008); Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007); "Theme Section: British North America's Global Age," *Histoire sociale / Social History* XLVI, no. 92 (November 2014): 267-366; and Dana Robert, "The First Globalization: The Internationalization of the Protestant Missionary Movement Between the Wars," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26, no. 2 (April 2002): 50-66.

77 Colley, *Elizabeth Marsh*, 300.

78 Hutchinson and Wolffe, *Short History of Global Evangelicalism*.

with their own, notwithstanding the novel's urban setting and Bellamy's muted religiosity.<sup>79</sup> The Compton community was, in effect, an outcome of the coming together of transnational ideas with local circumstances and values. It was, as Charles and Anthony noted, an "eccentric group" but at the same time "in no sense alien" to the surrounding Island culture and not disparaged by it.

As early-20th-century millenarian utopians, Compton community members held to religious views that were no longer a prominent part of the discourse in mainstream congregations. And they worked and married as well as worshipped as a distinct group. Nevertheless, their everyday round was necessarily much like that of their neighbours: cows had to be milked, crops harvested, businesses run. And if, beyond the quotidian, their leaders demonstrated abilities and local knowledge that could be put to wider use, they were evidently expected to contribute. Charles and Anthony perceived that expectation with regard to Hector. But decades earlier in the case of founder Ben there were also evidently extra-community expectations and involvements, as in 1916 when he was named to a provincial committee to recruit men for the navy.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, even the much younger second wife who survived Ben and lived as a widow to a great old age was proud to recall that she had routinely been called upon by neighbours to help with medical emergencies in advance or in the absence of a doctor.<sup>81</sup> Eschatological but not impractical, a discrete community but not unneighbourly, B. Compton Limited and its leaders lived and interacted effectively if selectively with other Island citizens.

Why, then, did many community descendants from the mid-20th century onward seem inclined to wilful forgetting so far as their unusual religious and communitarian past was concerned, more conscious of their ancestors' eccentricities and foibles than of the fact that their accomplishments had once been admired? Writing in the 1960s on "Varieties of Literary Utopias," Northrop Frye observed that in the western democracies there was "something of a paralysis of utopian thought and imagination" as a result of the "repudiation of Communism" as "the straight utopia" gave way to a taste for such utopian satires as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.<sup>82</sup> Fear and misunderstanding about "Communism" may have had some spillover effect even in remote and unlikely corners of North America. One result would have been unease, even about communitarian groups that bore no

79 The son of a Baptist minister and a Baptist minister's daughter, Bellamy became non-denominational in his outlook and was concerned with social rather than personal salvation. In his introduction to the 2007 Oxford University Press edition of *Looking Backward*, Beaumont speaks of Bellamy as having "a profoundly religious sensibility" (xii). See also George E. Connor, "The Awakening of Edward Bellamy: *Looking Backward* at Religious Influence," *Utopian Studies* 11, no. 1 (January 2000): 38-50, which argues for Bellamy's work as, among other things, an early catalyst for the social gospel movement.

80 "Naval Recruitment Committee Named," *Guardian*, 2 November 1916. See also "Attend Meeting," *Guardian*, 2 December 1914, where Ben is identified as one of several gentlemen attending a lobster packers' meeting.

81 Hornby, *Belfast People*, 97. The subject of women in the Compton community merits more attention than I have been able to give it in this article.

82 Northrop Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias," in *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. Frank E. Manuel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), quotations on 28, 29; William Golding, *Lord of the Flies: A Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954).

resemblance to Soviet-style socialism, among former members and outsiders alike. Two related aspects are also worth considering. In her book *Family Secrets: Living With Shame From the Victorians to the Present Day*, Deborah Cohen suggests that mid-20th-century families may actually have been more inclined than their Victorian ancestors to want to hide potentially embarrassing family matters (e.g. mixed-race ancestors, “defective” children, and homosexual uncles).<sup>83</sup> Cohen’s suggestion certainly accords with popular stereotypes of 1950s Cold War North America as an age of conformity, especially when it came to family norms.<sup>84</sup> At the same time, with regard specifically to Prince Edward Island, the mid-century decade saw the Island province drawn increasingly into a larger national and international culture and into the modernizing values and practices that prevailed in those larger worlds.<sup>85</sup> As that process took place, Compton community descendants and perhaps especially those of us who were on the threshold of adulthood wanted very much to be regarded not as “other” but rather as conventional, respectable, and “modern.” Thus, occasional questions about whether we were part of “those” Comptons were perceived as laden with innuendo and condescension. We interpreted them as harking back to our people’s differentness in terms of such matters as “communistic” families, educational deficiencies, intermarriage, and religious identity.

With regard to the latter, so far as markers of respectability were concerned, churchgoing within the mainstream denominations remained crucial on Prince Edward Island well into the late 20th century; interestingly, some adult children of 1970s back-to-the-landers recalled that Islanders’ tolerance of their come-from-away parents’ chosen way of life did not extend to their failure to attend church.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, across Canada until the late 1950s or early 1960s the United Church of Canada and the other mainstream Protestant denominations continued to experience remarkable growth as shown in such measures as church membership and Sunday school attendance.<sup>87</sup> Speaking personally and as one of “those” Comptons, I can attest that as an exceedingly self-conscious teenager I wanted nothing more than to blend into that church-sanctioned culture of respectability and normalcy. It would take many decades of living “away” and a historian’s slowly acquired awareness of social and cultural complexity before I concluded that it would be a worthwhile scholarly initiative and not simply a source of familial discomfort to revisit my ancestors’ religious “otherness” and their attempt to create an Island utopia.

83 Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Living With Shame From the Victorians to the Present Day* (London: Viking, 2013).

84 Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008; orig. ed. 1988) and, for a Canadian overview, Doug O’wram, *Born At the Right Time: A History of the Baby-Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), chap. 1.

85 MacDonald, *If You’re Stronghearted*, chap. 7. The process of modernization, MacDonald writes, “would reach its climax in the tumultuous times of the 1970s. . . . But it was in the 1950s that modernization became manifest” (227).

86 Alan MacEachern and Ryan O’Connor, “Back to the Island: The Back-to-the-Land Movement on PEI,” <http://niche-canada.org/member-projects/backtotheisland/home.html>.

87 Stuart MacDonald, “Death of Christian Canada? Do Canadian Church Statistics Support Callum Brown’s Theory of Church Decline?” Canadian Society of Church History, *Historical Papers* (2006): 135-56. See also Phyllis D. Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation: Making and Remaking the United Church of Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014).