Bringing the Commune to Canada: A Technocrat's Swedish Study Tour and the New Brunswick Program of Equal Opportunity

DURING THE 1960s THE PROVINCE OF NEW BRUNSWICK embarked upon a reform agenda that made the rest of Canada take notice. To combat a stark disparity in public services between English- and French-speaking New Brunswickers, Acadian premier Louis Robichaud brought in wide-reaching changes to health, education, and social welfare. To extend equitable social services to the small province's rural residents, especially New Brunswick's Acadian population in the province's north and southeast, the Program of Equal Opportunity (EO) was devised by politicians and implemented by bureaucrats and technocrats.[1] Unlike traditional bureaucrats, technocrats at mid-century drew on their training in the physical and social sciences such as public administration and economics for the development of public policy regimes. Many observers in the 1960s noted that Louis Robichaud "revolutionized" New Brunswick's government and sociopolitical order.[2] Equal Opportunity established government centralization to standardize the quality of public services; accessibility to social welfare programs was a key concern for government officials.

Reaction to EO among the province's anglophone elite was rank. Newspaperman Michael Wardell wrote that EO was "frankly based on Swedish socialism." Later in the same editorial, he opined that the reforms posed were "disastrous to human liberties."[3] Wardell, the editor of Fredericton's major daily and a regional magazine, the *Atlantic Advocate*, was contemptuous of

1 For a comprehensive characterization of technocrats, see Richard G. Olson's *Scientism and Technocracy in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Scientific Management* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), x-xiii. This forum contribution was adapted from the author's "Engineering Equal Opportunity: Technocracy and Modernity in New Brunswick during the Long 1960s" (MA thesis, University of New Brunswick, 2019). The title of the thesis project was inspired by James L. Kenny and Andrew G. Secord's article "Engineering Modernity: Hydroelectric Development in New Brunswick, 1945-70," *Acadiensis* 39, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2010): 3-26.

2 Michel Cormier, *Louis J. Robichaud: A Not So Quiet Revolution*, trans. Jonathan Kaplansky (Moncton, NB: Faye Editions, 2004), 13.

3 R.A. Young, "Remembering Equal Opportunity: Clearing the Undergrowth in New Brunswick," *Canadian Public Administration* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 94. Young quotes,

Bliss White, "Bringing the Commune to Canada: A Technocrat's Swedish Study Tour and the New Brunswick Program of Equal Opportunity," *Acadiensis* 49, no. 2 (Autumn/automne 2020): 185-195.

the architect of EO, Premier Robichaud, whom he called "a little man with a violently expressive mouth which grimaces as he articulates a torrent of words on any subject in French or English."[4] The British-born Wardell's ad hominem attack was informed by his partisanship and anti-French sentiments; however, his mischaracterization of New Brunswick's EO as the adoption of Swedish socialism was curiously rooted in a half-truth.

To modernize New Brunswick the province's bureaucrats and elected officials looked to other governments and jurisdictions for policy inspiration throughout the 1950s and 1960s, including Sweden. The wide-reaching *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation* (Byrne Commission) laid out the challenges and possible solutions for New Brunswick's sociopolitical woes in 1963. The commission was composed of the chairman Edward Byrne (a Bathurst lawyer), Arthur Andrews of St. Stephen, Ulderic Nadeau of Baker Brook in Madawaska County in the province's northwest, Charles N. Wilson (the former owner of Saint John Ship Building Ltd), and Alexandre Boudreau (a university administrator and director of extension services at the newly formed Université de Moncton).[5]

In an effort to find best practices for government reform in the 1960s, Edward Byrne suggested that the commission undertake a study tour outside of New Brunswick.[6] In the summer of 1963, Alexandre Boudreau was directed by Byrne to travel to Sweden to compile a report on Sweden's approach to social welfare. Boudreau's six-week tour of Sweden was completed toward the end of the Byrne Commission's major drafting period in 1963. In his memoirs, Edward Byrne suggested that the study tour of Sweden was an attempt to undermine Boudreau's contributions during the drafting of the overall report document. Boudreau's recommendations arising from his time in Sweden didn't make the final report that was submitted to the New Brunswick cabinet. His study tour document was simply included as an appendix of the *Royal Commission*

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at length, Wardell's "Responsible Self-Government: Battle Map of New Brunswick, 1966," *Atlantic Advocate* 56, no. 6 (February 1966): 14–15.

4 Wardell, "Responsible Self-Government," 14.

5 During the 1960s, government traditionally called upon academic officials to serve as external experts and consultants. New Brunswick's 1962 *Royal Commission on Higher Education* (Deutsch Commission) drew on the expertise of Queen's University economics professor John James Deutsch to study and recommend reforms to post-secondary education in New Brunswick.

6 E.G. Byrne, "I Can Remember . . . Memoirs of E.G. Byrne, OC, QC: The Reformer in the Three-Piece Suit," as recounted Wendell Fulton, Pamela Fulton Collection, ed. and transcribed Pamela J. Fulton, MC 3950/MS1A4, pp. 160–1, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick (PANB).

on Finance and Municipal Taxation. Nevertheless, this document sheds light on alternative approaches to social change at mid-century. Unlike the top-down change that the Byrne Commission and EO brought to New Brunswick, Boudreau's Swedish study tour highlights an approach to government reform that was more citizen-focused – even if the provincial government did not pursue such an agenda.

New Brunswick did not borrow any of the suggested administrative practices or government policies of Sweden's social democracy that arose from Boudreau's study tour. The provincial government of Louis Robichaud, however, articulated his vision for New Brunswick in roughly the same language. The Program of Equal Opportunity was as much an effort to improve the economic well-being of New Brunswickers as it was a modernization program. The young Acadian premier had a desire to enact wide-reaching progressive change with all the technical and bureaucratic resources of government. This process can be largely examined in terms of the concept of high modernism: the use of science and technical planning by the state to transform a population, an economy, and the natural environment to promote progressive change.[7] From Fredericton to Stockholm and jurisdictions from around the world, policymakers and elected officials during the 1950s and 1960s utilized the power of the state to improve the lives of their citizens.

Boudreau's study highlighted government policies, approaches to public administration, and social welfare in the Scandinavian country. Throughout the document, Boudreau underscored the absence of corruption within the civil service and the overall high level of integrity expressed by Swedish public officials. Some senior members of Sweden's Ministry of Social Affairs and Finance raised concerns with Boudreau when he outlined the state of public services in New Brunswick: "They unanimously expressed the conviction that to suggest an overall program of social welfare, with eight to ten percent of the labour force unemployed, such as we have in our province of New Brunswick, inevitably leads to economic bankruptcy."[8] New Brunswick had social welfare backwards according to the Swedish bureaucrats.

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7 James C. Scott, Seeing *Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 4.

8 For more on Alexandre Boudreau's remarkable life and career, see his memoir: Alexandre J. Boudreau, *À l'assaut des défis : Notes autobiographies* (Moncton, NB: l'Éditions Acadie, 1994) as well as Alexandre J. Boudreau, "Report on Study Trip to Sweden by Professor A.J. Boudreau," Appendix H, pp. 1-22 (esp. 16), in *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation in New Brunswick* (Fredericton, NB: Queen's Printer, 1963).

For the Swedes, the extension of government services in the form of public education, healthcare, and employment insurance was cast in moral terms. Boudreau encapsulated the ethos of Sweden's modern sociopolitical order by quoting Director-General of National Pensions Konrad Persson:

> All social welfare rests on two pillars, humanitarianism and economic progress. It is my experience that it is quite impossible to conduct social welfare solely from an economic standpoint, even though outwardly it could develop well. It would be more like a sharp, unfriendly cactus in the desert, which can grow very high, but which one prefers not to come too close to. At the same time, it is impossible to take only the humanitarian point of view, because then you would have a tree bearing beautiful fruit, but which could not live long because it would lack nourishment and strength for its continued existence.[9]

In New Brunswick, a tension existed between "high modernist" change and what has been termed "low modernism." Low modernism is far more concerned with bottom-up change and the preservation of the citizen's agency and participation within public policy development; however, this ethos shares many similarities to the aims of high modernism. While nearly all government technocrats that shaped EO where high modernists, Boudreau advocated for a more bottom-up approach. He thus embodies the low modernist tradition. Boudreau, whose training included a masters in public administration from Harvard University in 1943, became a union advocate in Quebec and Ontario as well as a government appointee to the Civil Service Commission – a forerunner to the Public Service Commission of Canada.[10] As an administrator at the newly formed Université de Moncton, a product of the wider era of Equal Opportunity, Boudreau was hired on by Edward Byrne as a commissioner to study municipal taxation and financing to restructure municipalities in the hopes of standardizing public service delivery. With a broad mandate, Byrne and his commissioners considered best practices in Canada as well as jurisdictions further afield.

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9 Boudreau, "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," in *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 16, 22.

10 Boudreau received a scholarship to attend Harvard University's new Faculty of Public Administration on the recommendation of the federal Ministry of Fisheries; see Boudreau, *À l'assaut des défis*, 35.

The undertaking of a travel study during the drafting of the report was always in the back of the chairman's mind; while he thought about a visit to Vancouver to contextualize west coast public policy, Boudreau had been a persistent advocate for the entire commission to visit Sweden. Apparently, Byrne used the tour as a form of bait to ensure that the Moncton-based academic signed onto the final report. At a meeting, Byrne announced his plans: "I want you to go to Scandinavia . . . . When you come back, I want you to write a report, and it's going to be put in our report as an appendix." In recounting his plans to the premier, Byrne assured Robichaud: "He's going on a witch hunt looking for information. You're lucky the whole bloody Commission didn't go to Sweden." As a biting end to his description of the organization of Boudreau's diplomatic mission, Byrne recounted the fact that the Moncton professor had an unlimited expense account. More significantly, he denounced the work of his colleague: "He enjoyed himself immensely. He came back, and this is the Gospel truth, I've never read that report he prepared."[11] Byrne's animus toward Boudreau underscored a fundamental disagreement in approaches to change in New Brunswick. While the chairman pushed for more centralization of public services through the elimination of county government, the Acadian professor touted advocated for a more holistic approach to social welfare policy and less centralization.

Boudreau travelled widely throughout Sweden in 1963.[12] He consulted the heads of government departments and met with a wide array of civil society members; the Acadian technocrat produced a nuanced portrait of Sweden's

11 Byrne, "I Can Remember . . . Memoirs of E.G. Byrne," Pamela Fulton Collection, MC3950/MS1A4, pp. 160-1, PANB. A note on Byrne's language is needed. While he writes that he did not read the study tour report authored by Boudreau, it is extremely unlikely that Byrne did not know of the report's recommendations or the overall tenor of the tour to Sweden. As the head of a powerful government commission tasked to overhaul the province, Byrne would have been privy to the actions and ideas of his staff and fellow commissioner.

12 An interesting parallel to Boudreau's trip to Sweden is Erin Morton's examination of a Nova Scotian, Mary E. Black, who embarked on a tour of Sweden in 1937, a generation before Boudreau, to learn about craft and design matters. An occupational therapist by profession, Black later returned to Nova Scotia in 1943 and assumed the directorship of the province's Handicraft Division within the Department of Trade and Industry. While in Sweden, Black enrolled at the Säterglántan Vävskola, a craft institute, in Insjön. Unlike Alexandre Boudreau, though, Black was interested in Sweden's "antimodernist ideals"; see Morton, "Not a Vacation, But a Hardening Process": The Self-Empowerment Work of Therapeutic Craft in Nova Scotia," *Culture Unbound* 6, no. 4 (September 2014): 773-89 (esp. 780). Black's chief interest was weaving practices in Sweden. The art form in the Scandinavian country celebrated ties to nature and rurality and subscribed to folk practices and artforms. These values formed a component of Nova Scotia's policy on craft-based economic development during the 1940s and 1950s.

social welfare regime in the 1960s. Regardless that Byrne's aim for the Sweden tour in 1963 was professional subterfuge, Boudreau's report with observations of Swedish public policy serves as a useful artifact from the era of Equal Opportunity. His recommendations sought to temper the high modernist approaches to government reform. His terms of reference were quite broad, and in his introductory message of the final report Boudreau explained in his nebulous account of this work the need for a broad context: "I found it impossible to study, or to give a clear picture of Social Welfare in Sweden, without establishing the atmosphere and conditions within which the whole program operates."[13] In his memoirs, Boudreau noted that he had a long time interest in the Scandinavian nation and that his six-week tour of the country afforded him a rich cultural immersion.[14]

Boudreau's time abroad took him to the centres of political, economic, educational, and bureaucratic power as well as the rural areas. Six chapters provide a comprehensive overview of the country. From "Geography and Historical Background" to "Government and Public Administration," "Fiscal Policy" as well as "Education" and "Economy," the report is exhaustive. But perhaps the area of chief concern was "Social Welfare in Sweden." The Swedish approach to government that Boudreau found novel was their focus on collective organization and problem solving: "The principle of collective responsibility applies to cabinet."[15] This approach also expended to their organization of local government.

Perhaps one of the principal takeaways from the report was the Swedes' propensity for collectivism within the jurisdictional organization of the country. As a unitary state, power and social services flowed from Stockholm down to municipalities; however, the institution of the commune, which traced its origin from the parish at the time when Christianity was introduced to Sweden, had existed in its modern form since 1863. Boudreau recounted that

13 Alexandre Boudreau, "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," in *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*.

14 Upon landing in Stockholm, the Acadian met with the Canadian ambassador and relevant introductions were organized. Interestingly enough, the proceedings of nearly all of Boudreau's meetings were conducted in French, and he heaped praise on his multilingual hosts; see Boudreau, *À l'assaut des défis*, 72.

15 Boudreau, "Report on Study Trip to Sweden" in *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 6.

it was, in fact, the "primary unit of government."[16] A commune could be considered a geographic region, but it also normally included a city.

As to the political organization of this level of government, the Acadian low modernist underscored the grassroots composition of the commune. An elected council composed of at least six officials had jurisdiction over "direct services to property, elementary education, care of the poor, and child welfare."[17]

At the core of the Swedish model of public administration during the 1960s was a reliance on representative boards. Across all policy fields, around 50 boards sought to implement the directives of Stockholm. In diverse areas such as labour, social services, and workers protection, each had an "autonomous board" headed by a director general and composed of five to ten representatives who were all appointed by the central government. Boudreau recounted with great interest their operation: "As a rule, the boards are representative. For example, on the Labour Market Board, employers, employees, and farmers will be represented." It was through these organizations that social services were implemented. Government ministries only established the policies and possessed around 500 civil servants. The lion's share of the 300,000-strong Swedish bureaucracy in 1963 was dispersed throughout the communes and staffed the administrative boards. With astonishment, Boudreau thought these government-appointed boards would tend toward an "autocratic" mode of operation. However, he assured his readers that the Swedish "constitution and subsequent legislation" enriched a highly transparent political culture for the execution of government decisions.[18]

The principal aim of the Acadian technocrat's tour to Sweden was to find best practices within their social welfare system. In his report, Boudreau declares: "In no country in the world have the recommendations of the Beveridge Report been more fully implemented than in Sweden."[19] He was struck by the humane approach to the administration and aim of social services that included direct citizen participation. For the Swedes, he

16 Boudreau, "Report on Study Trip to Sweden" in *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 6.

17 Boudreau, "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," in *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 7.

18 Boudreau, "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," in *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 9-11.

19 Boudreau, "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," in *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 36.

focused on their desire to seek full employment. In his meetings with senior government officials, the wider philosophy of social welfare that focused on citizen participation was pressed upon Boudreau.

The expression of state intervention for the improvement of citizen well-being foreshadows a speech made to launch the Equal Opportunity Program in the New Brunswick Legislature in 1965. Louis Robichaud spoke before his ministers and the MLAs assembled that "the standards and equality of our education system, are at present, directly dependent upon those limited resources and must be raised significantly, otherwise our economic future is dim."[20] Indeed, this approach to government reform, and the goals for economic and social development through education and employment, was shared by citizens and public officials on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Swedish officials also reacted with concern when the Acadian technocrat outlined the pre-EO social assistance scheme. In Sweden, money extended to the unemployed was linked to work programs; this was not the case in New Brunswick and the Swedish officials thought that such a lack of work-based aid would be irresponsible and harm the province's "moral fiber." According to the Swedes, the most desirable social welfare system was one that did not discriminate based on the economic health of a jurisdiction: "penalizing underdeveloped areas solely because they have been neglected or did not possess the same natural or economic advantages" was unthinkable.[21] One of the key takeaways from Boudreau's political and cultural immersion was his advocacy for the role of an activist state that promoted investment for rural residents.

Perhaps what surprised the Acadian low modernist the most was how effectively Sweden's welfare system operated. With what he considered a "loose jurisdictional arrangement" between the communes, the provinces, and the central government, there was little "waste" of crucial money for social programs and aid.[22] The transparency afforded to the operation of government and the integrity with which officials executed public decisions was striking for Boudreau. Notably absent from the final report submitted as an appendix to Byrne Commission were Boudreau's 14 recommendations arising from his time

20 Louis J. Robichaud, "A Program for Equal Opportunity," speech given at the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick, 16 November 1965 (Fredericton: Queen's Printer), 5.

21 Boudreau, "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," in *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 37–8.

22 Boudreau, "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," in *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 53–4.

in Sweden. These were presumably cut by Byrne. The technocrat laid out his recommendations for his fellow commissioners to review in 1963. He outlined the need for change in the federal funding formula for the unemployed. He wanted to see provincial commitments fall by "5% for each 1% of employment above 3%" and wanted more federal money to help those who suffered from unemployment in Canada's poorer provinces. Enamored by the representative board system in Sweden, Boudreau proposed that the administering of aid be depoliticized and composed of a seven-member board. Membership would be extended to two members representing the clergy as well as two social workers with a gender balance, where the woman representative would be "trained in child welfare." He recommended two representatives to come from the fields of education and medicine so that a teacher and doctor could serve on the board. All members of the Provincial Welfare Board would serve under the auspices of a minister of Youth and Welfare in New Brunswick. The minister would also be an *ex officio* member of the board. Extending out from this potential board, the technocrat wanted to see local boards represent welfare recipients in each town and city as well as across New Brunswick's counties. Harkening back to his discussions with Swedish officials, Boudreau suggested that the recipients of welfare be encouraged to conduct "relief work." As in Sweden, monies extended to unemployed citizens should be granted based on a "means test" in New Brunswick. In addition, federal changes to employment laws would be necessary to model New Brunswick's welfare funding after Sweden's system. Boudreau also wanted citizen participation within the administration of social services. Another recommendation pushed for children's aid groups along with other benevolent organizations to "cooperate" with the provincial or local boards.[23] Boudreau wanted the welfare regime to be strong but also visible in the lives of citizens. This approach is truly representative of "classic" low modernism.

Creativity marks Boudreau's suggestions for social programs for the young and old. One of his more interesting recommendations was for the eventual adoption of a "Home Samaritan" program in the province. This was taken directly from the Scandinavian country's program to help the elderly. Home Samaritans were effectively home-care workers paid for by the Social Assistance boards in each commune. The Home Samaritans extended aid to senior citizens, who could remain in their own homes but required help with more challenging household chores or light physical care. These workers,

23 Boudreau, "Recommendations for New Brunswick," in "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 55–6.

Boudreau discovered, were trained by the state to be Home Samaritans.[24] Not forgetting the needs of youth, Boudreau noted the utility of a specialized youth committee under the umbrella of the welfare boards to provide programing for young New Brunswickers relating to "leadership training, leisure-time organization, and cultural promotion." The ultimate aim of these activities, according to the report's author, was to prevent young New Brunswickers from seeking social welfare funding in the future.[25]

The draft report also offered ambitious recommendations in the fields of health care. Before any adoption of medicare in Canada (save Saskatchewan), Boudreau thought it prudent to have at least a "token" user fee for hospital services. A three-dollar-a-day user fee would be incurred in hospitals for those who could afford the tax; New Brunswickers living in poverty could have this payment defrayed by a local welfare board. He saw the need for a stand-alone hospital director in each provincial facility to professionalize the administration of care. His Swedish-acquired obsession with administrative boards permeated his tenth recommendation as well: the hospital administrator could strike a board to support his or her operation of a hospital. Returning to a Scandinavian innovation, Boudreau proposed the creation of "Cottage Hospitals" affixed to each public hospital in the province.[26] This development would provide support for senior citizens and function as a nursing home within the operational structure of a hospital. After his six-week tour, he recounted that Cottage Hospitals offered nursing care without "the costly hospital care." These institutions were devoid of complex technologies or

24 Boudreau, "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," in *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 52.

25 Boudreau, "Recommendations for New Brunswick," in "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 57.

26 Boudreau, "Recommendations for New Brunswick," in "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 57. The cottage hospital model was already employed in Newfoundland from the mid-1930s to well into the 1960s. More than 23 of these publicly funded cottage hospitals provided rural care for nearly half of the population; see Linda Kealey and Heather Molyneaux, "On the Road to Medicare: Newfoundland in the 1960s," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 95. Missionary-led care under Wilfred Grenfell and his teams of doctors and nurses from Britain provided aid for sections of northern Newfoundland and coastal Labrador. Developed by the Scots, the cottage hospital was seen as a low-cost facility for rural locations in the 1930s; see J.T.H. Connor, Jennifer J. Connor, Monica G. Kidd, and Maria Mathews, "Conceptualizing Health Care in Rural and Remote Pre-Confederation Newfoundland as Ecosystem," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 30, no. 1 (November 2015): 117–18. There exists a rich literature on this subject; see also Gordon S. Lawson and Andrew F. Noseworthy, "Newfoundland's Cottage Hospital System: 1920–1970," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 26, no. 2 (October 2009): 477–98.

facilities; however, clients were cared for by nurses and a visiting doctor.[27] In New Brunswick, Boudreau wanted to see 25 per cent of patients in each hospital facility moved into these Cottage Hospitals to lower the cost of healthcare.[28]

Other recommendations in the technocrat's report represented changes to a more diverse area of social policy. Boudreau wanted to see improvements to professional education at the Université de Moncton. These included "a bilingual School of Social Work and Public Administration." He desired a specialized appeals board to reconsider the work of the various other provincial and local boards in the province as well as the complete reorganization of a few government departments. Since his recommendations focused on the areas of social welfare, the low modernist technocrat wanted to make service delivery more effective by amalgamating the departments of Labour, Youth, and Welfare. Finally, he wished to adopt a powerful Labour Market Board similar to the one he observed in Stockholm.[29]

These innovative recommendations were met with silence by Edward Byrne, an official more enamored by government centralization than with more bottom-up initiatives. The legacy of Alexandre Boudreau's Swedish study tour, however, points to trans-national exchange and interest in governmental reform in 1960s New Brunswick.

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27 Boudreau, "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," in *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 53.

28 Boudreau, "Recommendations for New Brunswick," in "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 57.

29 Boudreau, "Recommendations for New Brunswick," in "Report on Study Trip to Sweden," *Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation*, 58.

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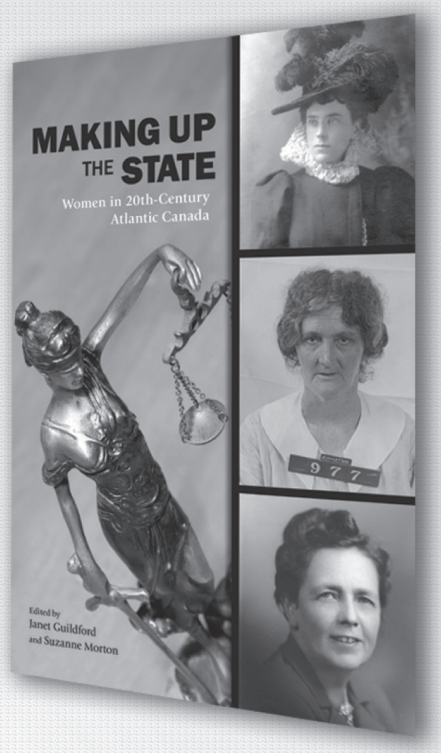

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