

New Brunswick Revolutionary: A Review of Donald J. Savoie's *Harrison McCain: Single-Minded Purpose* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2013)

Don Nerbas

In 1956 two brothers from Florenceville, New Brunswick, established a novel enterprise in their hometown: a frozen french fry business. In the decades to follow, the business, McCain Foods, and the brothers, Harrison and Wallace McCain, would transform the upper St. John River valley into a local staging ground for globalization. Harrison McCain (1927–2004), the subject of Donald Savoie's new book, was nothing less than a revolutionary.

Donald Savoie, who is a professor of public administration at the Université de Moncton and widely known for his writings on regional economic development and government, first met Harrison McCain in 1982 while working for the Department of Regional Economic Expansion. They became lifelong friends. For the preparation of this biography, Savoie was given access to McCain's papers and interviewed a long list of prominent individuals who were associated with him. Benefitting from the access of an insider, Savoie weaves together a biographical portrait that reveals the humanity of his subject through triumph and tragedy. McCain's loyalty to Florenceville and New Brunswick, his civic-mindedness, and his determination as an entrepreneur are the central themes in this book. For Savoie, who declares "my heroes are entrepreneurs," the story of Harrison McCain is one of uncomplicated success (x).

But, as Savoie points out, the rise of McCain Foods was very much dependent upon the helping hand of the state. The company was the first project of Hugh John Flemming's New Brunswick Industrial Board, which supported crucial early financing. And the construction of a cold storage facility was heavily subsidized by a federal government grant. Government aid to McCain Foods would continue to flow in various forms after the company's Florenceville operations were established, especially as Ottawa made available more funds through various regional development programs during the 1960s and 1970s, not to mention federally funded research that would eventually result in the development of the french fry-friendly Shepody potato.

On the demand side, the expansion of McCain Foods was fuelled by the emerging market for frozen foods. The time efficiency of the product filled a growing niche as more married women entered the labour force and as restaurants and fast-food chains proliferated. Selling the frozen french fry was, nonetheless, not as easy in the 1960s as we might imagine today. The McCain brothers and their salesmen visited restaurant owners and chefs across Canada to convince them of the advantages of the frozen french fry; at a time when the infrastructure for storing frozen food was lacking, they were "essentially creating in Canada a new market, not competing in an existing one" (97).

Yet the company's most impressive growth occurred outside Canada. Within ten years of its founding, McCain Foods had expanded into Britain. "As early as 1970," reports Savoie, "nearly half of McCain's revenues came from Great Britain" (131). By the early 1970s, Harrison had dispatched McCain executive George McClure to survey opportunities in continental Europe. Beginning with the acquisition of two plants in the Netherlands, the McCains established a commanding presence in European supermarkets and fast-food chains. McCain Foods had also commenced business in the United

States by this time; but, in the highly competitive American market, expansion was slower and more cautious than in Europe.

Despite the internationalization of McCain Foods, Harrison McCain remained rooted in Florenceville. He insisted that the town continue to serve as more than the company's symbolic headquarters. His ability to "pull against gravity" stemmed from the fact that McCain Foods remained a family firm, essentially a partnership between Harrison and Wallace McCain. Yet, as Savoie details over two chapters, this functioning partnership dissolved when disagreements over corporate governance and succession erupted. When Wallace appointed his son Michael as CEO of United States operations in 1992, open conflict followed. Ultimately, Harrison prevailed. Wallace was removed from his position as co-CEO of McCain Foods. And Michael McCain would not succeed his father and uncle as the new CEO; rather, the British-born Michael Mann would assume the position. McCain Foods is essentially run from Toronto today. Given this ultimate outcome, Savoie's faith in the capacity of private enterprise to serve as a promoter of regional interests may seem misplaced. The history of business in the Maritimes includes many examples of "community-oriented entrepreneurs" whose enterprises migrated from the region or escaped local control once the era of family enterprise ended. This is one theme of Bill Acheson's influential study of entrepreneurship in the National Policy period; and much like the region's industrialists of the late nineteenth century, Harrison McCain and McCain Foods demonstrated "considerable initiative" but operated under structural conditions that tended to generate capitalist incentives that moved activities beyond the region.¹

Savoie ably describes the public policy environment of New Brunswick and how it aided McCain Foods; he provides a revealing depiction of Harrison's social and political networks, which revolved around—but were not exclusive to—New Brunswick and the Liberal party; and he provides a rich (though sometimes repetitive) description of his personality and worldview.

Despite these qualities, the book offers a very uneven account of Harrison McCain within the context of his times. The book's failure to locate McCain within his broader social context is undoubtedly a product of Savoie's reliance upon personal papers and interviews. Primary research beyond these sources is lacking. The book is also notably uninterested in the relevant regional literature in the areas of business history and rural and agricultural history. As such, in the New Brunswick that Savoie depicts, rich men and politicians appear to possess all the agency. Meanwhile, statements such as "Harrison's DNA was wired for ambition and success" (34) or "an entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen were in Harrison's blood" (269) serve as inadequate substitutes for analysis of the transmission of wealth and social and cultural values across generations: after all, Harrison was, as Savoie shows, born into a prominent and politically connected Florenceville family, and he married the daughter of New Brunswick premier John B. McNair. Harrison's social origins made him a natural member of the provincial elite who took seriously what he saw as his responsibilities to stewardship within his home community and province.

Though the book makes an effort to invoke New Brunswick patriotism, it nonetheless appears to be shaped by a more narrow ideological purpose. As Savoie moves through the history of New Brunswick from the arrival of Harrison's great-grandfather in the 1820s, the society he portrays is dubiously depicted as a meritocratic frontier, which it was not. And we are told that the Great

¹ Acheson, T.W. "The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880-1910." *Acadiensis* 1.2 (Spring 1972): 3-28.

Depression was not as bad in Carleton County as elsewhere, “partly because the government had not yet entered the social services field, and the people of the county were accustomed to being self-sufficient” (27). These unusual observations imply an apparent distaste for the social-democratic use of government resources and powers. Ironically, but perhaps not unexpectedly, Savoie has little sympathy for the small- and medium-sized farmers who saw their self-sufficiency diminished in step with the rise of McCain Foods.² Savoie writes that “some farmers did not prosper and, rather than look in the mirror, they blamed McCain Foods” (262). As was true of Harrison McCain himself, Savoie also seems to have “little time for a collective approach” (100). The New Brunswick potato farmers who opposed McCain Foods appear in the book as a spectre hopelessly opposing the inviolable laws of the market and liberal individualism; their experiences and collective political mobilization receive no attention, despite being participants in a strong tradition of independent farmer politics and grassroots cooperative organization in the upper St. John River valley.³

The rationalization of farming effected by the state and McCain Foods in the upper St. John River valley over the course of the twentieth century was a revolutionary event. Farms became larger and more efficient than before, but competitive pressure squeezed out smaller producers. For Savoie, this process was inevitable, and the presence of the McCains mitigated against even worse outcomes. But we should not evade the fact that the rise of Harrison McCain and McCain Foods did in fact reflect the balance of power in rural New Brunswick; small producers who embraced a different sort of political economy did not have access to the state in the same way as McCain Foods. Savoie’s teleological depiction of this process of “globalization” understates the fundamentally political and contested nature of the story, a story in which the “visible hand” of McCain Foods and the state was ever present and active in organizing and shaping the market.

Defending Stephen Harper’s infamous statement that Atlantic Canada suffers from “a culture of defeat” (275) in the final chapter, Savoie calls for a proliferation of regional entrepreneurship to be more flexibly supported by government. Critics may claim that this is a call to double-down on development strategies that for generations have produced very mixed results for the region. Like other community-oriented entrepreneurs produced by the region, the source of Harrison McCain’s civic-mindedness, including his willingness to “pull against gravity” for New Brunswick, emerged from a particular social and cultural setting that is unlikely to be reproduced by entrepreneurship or pro-business government policies alone.

Don Nerbas teaches in the Department of History and Culture at Cape Breton University. He is the author of *Dominion of Capital: The Politics of Big Business and the Crisis of the Canadian Bourgeoisie, 1914-1947* (U of Toronto P, 2013).

² McLaughlin, Darrell. “From Self-Reliance to Dependence to Struggle: Agribusiness and the Politics of Potatoes in New Brunswick.” *People, Resources, and Power: Critical Perspectives on Underdevelopment in the Atlantic Region*. Ed. Gary Burrill and Ian McKay. Halifax: Gorsebrook Research Institute, 1987. 30-35.

³ Frank, David. “The 1920s: Class and Region, Resistance and Accommodation.” *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*. Ed. E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise. Toronto/Fredericton: U of Toronto P/Acadiensis P, 1993. 236-38; and Timothy D. Lewis, “Defeating the Farmers’ Efforts to Help Themselves: The Role of the State in the Collapse of the United Farmers Co-operative Company of New Brunswick, 1918-1922.” *Acadiensis* 35.1 (Autumn 2005): 58.