

**REVIEW OF****TONY TREMBLAY, *THE FIDDLEHEAD MOMENT: PIONEERING AN ALTERNATIVE CANADIAN MODERNISM IN NEW BRUNSWICK*. MONTREAL & KINGSTON: MCGILL-QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2019.****David Creelman**

In *The Fiddlehead Moment: Pioneering an Alternative Canadian Modernism in New Brunswick*, Tony Tremblay allows readers to acknowledge a debt. Located on the eastern edge of the continent and constructed as a culture and economy on the margin, the citizens of New Brunswick have sometimes accepted the myth that they are a community out of step with and behind people elsewhere. In his recent study of a group of mid-century cultural producers at the University of New Brunswick (UNB), Tremblay illuminates the work of the writers, scholars, and intellectuals who brought to New Brunswick a “rehabilitative modernism” (xv), the goal of which was to help the province’s people refashion their connection to their cultural heritage, while reshaping it to address the challenges of the twentieth century. *The Fiddlehead Moment* focuses on the lives and careers of A.G. Bailey, Desmond Pacey, and Fred Cogswell, whose labour as writers and critics was instrumental in shepherding a distinct set of modernist practices onto the Canadian scene. In doing so, Tremblay helps to reverse “the paucity of knowledge resources that have made it difficult for New Brunswickers to understand themselves as a people” (xv), and further clarifies the distinct identity that anchors the culture of the province.

*The Fiddlehead Moment* opens with a concise historical account of New Brunswick and the Maritime region. In a chapter that undergraduate professors could easily assign as background reading for their students, Tremblay maps out the pre-Confederation period of prosperity produced by Jeffersonian policies and the Napoleonic Wars, and he notes the complicated relationships between the province’s diverse Anglo, Franco, and Indigenous communities. Having traced the growth and some of the problems of the colonial period, Tremblay then reviews how the region was compromised after Confederation by the structural impoverishment imposed by the National Policy and then worsened by the cancellation of differential railway fees. This careful attention to the economic foundation of the region explains how New Brunswickers came to accept the myth of the province as a supplicant. At a time when “the old cultural locus” of the Maritimes was “being denigrated, its writers maligned, and their achievements belittled”—in a period when the narrative of “Maritime stagnation of thought and decadence of expression had been normalized”—a group of scholars assembled around A.G. Bailey to “challenge the new narratives of the region” and “precipitate a number of institutional, aesthetic, and intellectual measures to counter them” (39). In the chapters that follow, Tremblay explores his three main figures by providing for each a biographical overview, an examination of their most significant work, and an analysis of their contribution to the province’s distinctive modernism.

From Tremblay’s perspective, A.G. Bailey is the generative figure of “Fiddlehead modernism,” and his innovations flourished because he resisted myopic nativist impulses and instead “practiced...[a] strategic localism [that] was outward looking” (218). Bailey’s role as one of the architects of UNB as a modern university is carefully documented. Raised in a privileged, intellectual, familial circle, Bailey came to UNB from the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John, a city wherein he had associated with the modernist “artistic community who gathered at Ted Campbell’s downtown studio” (68). Once in Fredericton, Bailey set to work reshaping UNB’s relationship with the arts. As the founding professor of

the History Department, a campaigner for a modern academic library, an advocate for a much-needed university and provincial archives, and a voice calling for a provincial art gallery, Bailey built institutional structures and also connected UNB with important donors, including acting as a key force “steering [Lord] Beaverbrook in the directions that UNB and the province needed to go” (87).

According to Tremblay, Bailey’s contributions are rooted in his embrace of modernism and particularly T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which inspired him to maintain a balance between connecting the province to its past and mapping out a distinct regional path forward. By focusing on the rural over the urban and the local over the cosmopolitan/global, Bailey was able to “reanimate the past in the style of the present” (73). In doing so, he articulated the principles that would allow the university and the province to challenge the national narrative of marginalization and “transcend colonialism” (76). In the aesthetic and creative realm, Bailey’s most significant innovation was to found a writing group, the Bliss Carmen Society, and in 1945 he established *The Fiddlehead* as a vehicle for the group’s work. While Bailey’s innovations transformed the university and shifted the region’s culture, Tremblay also notes that by hiring, mentoring, and supporting a host of like-minded young academics, Bailey ensured that his program of modernization would flourish.

Of all the scholars who came to UNB, the two who did the most to advance the literary life of the institution and the province were Desmond Pacey and Fred Cogswell. Tremblay examines each in a separate chapter, but the reader cannot help but sense that his deeper admiration is reserved for Cogswell. Tremblay provides an incisive critique of Pacey’s background and accomplishments, and respects the English Department Chair’s willingness to challenge the reductive nationalist and centrist tendencies that were emerging across Canada: “Rather than try to present a coherent Canada,...Pacey...capture[s] differences in eras and aesthetics (romanticism and realism), differences in sociology (rural and urban), differences in ethnicity (Indigenous and settler), and...differences in geography” (131). Pacey played a central role in identifying, evaluating, anthologizing, and critiquing Maritime and Canadian writers, and Tremblay provides sympathetic contexts for some of the critical decisions that now seem limited. For example, Pacey’s stand against historical romance is defended not as a “ploy to marginalize women or a generic form suddenly out of fashion but rather an effort to temper an expression of imperial history that his...immersion in Bailey’s New Brunswick had disavowed” (134).

The book’s tone becomes more expansive when Tremblay begins his analysis of Fred Cogswell’s career. Tremblay has previously examined Cogswell’s work in *Fred Cogswell: The Many-Dimensioned Self* (2012). Tremblay returns to and reshapes some of the biographical and critical information in his earlier study to provide an admiring look at Cogswell’s career as poet, editor, publisher, and translator. As Tremblay notes, “*The Fiddlehead* may have been Bailey’s creation, but it was Cogswell’s child” (224). The book examines the herculean work that Cogswell undertook when he became the periodical’s editor in 1953 and proceeded to expand the subscription list and internationalize the list of contributors, all the while maintaining local connections. Cogswell’s efforts to mentor young writers, publish chapbooks of promising poets, and serve as a champion of deserving newcomers, made him a beloved and influential figure in Canadian letters even after he ceased his editorial duties in 1967. Not only did Cogswell forge ties across Canada’s English-speaking literary circles, but he was also one of the first persistent translators to build bridges into the Acadian literary community. His “capstone collection,” *Unfinished Dreams: Contemporary Poetry of Acadie* (1990), co-edited and translated with Jo-Anne Elder, introduced English readers to the “generative and life affirming” work of such modernist writers as Herménégilde Chiasson (205).

*The Fiddlehead Moment* confirms that with the leadership of broad-minded scholars, “modernism can also germinate in non-metropolitan locales, have humanist and moderate, even conservative aims; and be socially transformative at the same time as being aesthetically disruptive” (211). Overall, the book succeeds in its efforts to examine and celebrate the important alternate modernist perspectives created in New Brunswick. Tremblay’s style is clear and persuasive. Even more compelling is his vast research as he handles with ease extensive archival sources, personal interviews, letters, and a wide variety of textual materials, weaving the whole into a compelling study. The documentation is thorough, the endnotes include some excellent clarifications and interesting sidelines, and the bibliography will be helpful for scholars studying modernism and regionalism.

McGill-Queen’s University Press has produced an attractive volume, though—and here my biases as a literature critic emerge—I wish that the endnote system could be occasionally relaxed, if only to allow the writers’ names to appear with the epigraphs that begin each chapter. In a field as broad as this, there are bound to be unexamined bits that feel like gaps or omissions. Elizabeth Brewster’s role as a cultural producer is acknowledged, though references to other influential figures are missing. M. Travis Lane’s extensive work as a reviewer and shaper of tastes might have been worth including, and curiously not much is said of the editors who took up Cogswell’s editorial mantle. Gibbs and Thompson are noted, but hardly a mention is made to the later editors, including Ross Leckie, who continued the mission and work of *The Fiddlehead* and served as the longest continuous editor in the journal’s storied history.

Part of my pleasure in reading *The Fiddlehead Moment* is rooted in my own experiences with UNB and central New Brunswick. Having started graduate work in UNB’s English Department in 1984, I remember the palpable sense of loss and transition that seemed to float through the halls at that time. Though new arrivals to the department did not understand the significance of the changes, Alden Nowlan had died the summer before, Fred Cogswell had retired in 1983, and though we heard that Dr. Bailey was still in the city, we did not often see him on campus. Nevertheless, my professors had been hired by or worked with all of the people that Tremblay has studied, and reading this book brings into clearer focus the questions and concerns that were still working themselves out across the university at that time. Indeed, there are numerous occasions when Tremblay’s observations about the contributions made by Bailey and Cogswell could also be applied to Tremblay himself. The paths set by innovators like Bailey and Cogswell are still bearing fruit, for scholars like Tremblay have continued to critique neoliberal globalization, empower the scholarly exploration of the local, and build bridges between the diverse communities of the province in an enduring attempt to expand earlier postcolonial projects.

When studying the trajectory set by the Bailey, it is not hard to think of Tremblay’s many books, edited collections, and articles and sense the continuity between the two cultural producers. I smiled when I read that when Bailey discovered that the university archives were largely unexamined and unorganized, he drew up a list of appropriate authors and set his honours students to “research topics and turn them ‘into pamphlet form for study purposes’ across the province” (83). In a similar way, the *New Brunswick Literary Encyclopedia* (<http://stu-sites.ca/nble/>), a wonderful web resource, was founded by Tremblay nearly a decade ago and has been subsequently populated by entries written by his top English students. *The Fiddlehead Moment* notes of A.G. Bailey what a future scholar could say of Tremblay’s work: “Smaller worlds are best served by studied rather than differential openness (or opposition) to larger worlds, and that cultural colonialism is overcome by practiced participation, not isolation” (79). Given that Tremblay’s analysis of modernism in New Brunswick constitutes a significant contribution to the assessment of Canadian modernism as a whole, *The Fiddlehead Moment*

demonstrates that “the local does indeed matter in larger social formations and...local producers, even in hinterlands like New Brunswick, influence the arc of movements in the country as a whole” (8).

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