

REVIEW OF**W.A. SPRAY, *THE BLACKS IN NEW BRUNSWICK*, REPRINT EDITION.****FREDERICTON: ST. THOMAS UNIVERSITY, 2021.****Franco Paz**

“The fewer words, the better prayer,” Luther once wrote. W.A. Spray takes only fifty-seven pages, not counting the various appendices, to tell the story of Black Canadians in New Brunswick and does it in a way that proves the old dictum true. *The Blacks in New Brunswick* was first published in 1972. It has been out of print and rather hard to find for many years, a point to which I will return. But first the good news: The book is now back in print. It has been re-published by St. Thomas University (STU), where Spray taught in the History Department for thirty-two years. Proceeds, according to the university’s website, will fund bursaries for Black students. Poet Thandiwe McCarthy, who played a key role in having the book reprinted, has contributed a Foreword to this new edition and historian Funké Aladejebi has written a Preface that places Spray’s book in the current historiographical context. Suffice it to say that Spray’s book is still a good book. It is a foundational book, even as it remains perhaps the most understudied work in the historiography of Black Canadians.

Let’s begin with the history: Spray’s book is “an attempt, fragmentary as it must be, to try to relate the history of Black settlement in New Brunswick” (xi). The author foreshadows later theoretical developments with his emphasis on the ambiguity of freedom: he writes, for example, that “the status of the majority of Blacks who were listed as ‘servants’ was... no different than that of those listed as slaves” (1). He emphasizes the historical significance of the so-called “common law of the colonies,” noting that “Although no laws were ever passed in New Brunswick which legalized slavery, it was considered legal simply because it was recognized in other British colonies” (9). Spray then describes the lives of Black Canadians who remained in New Brunswick when many left for Sierra Leone, as well as the lives of refugees who arrived in the province after the War of 1812. He notes that they were considered “little better than slaves,” and cites such incidents as the allotment of 1,050 acres in the “Black Refugee Tract” to six white men.

I have said that Spray’s book is a good book, and I have said that it is a foundational book. Both of these statements are true. But Spray’s book is a bit more than just good history. It is, in fact, a book that I believe in some ways exemplifies the greatest virtues to which the discipline might aspire. This is a book that is overtly and unapologetically concerned with the present. If we take the practice of history to be, in essence, a question – the question of what is still happening *even though* it should have been past – then Spray’s book is surely a triumph. On the subject of equality, Spray writes of how Black New Brunswickers were unable to become freemen of Saint John as per the city’s 1785 charter, and of how only freemen of the city could practice a trade or sell goods within city limits. He then writes: “From the information available, it appears that Black people were considered second-class citizens in Saint John since the incorporation of that city. According to a report prepared by the New Brunswick Association for the Advancement of Coloured People in the 1960s, it would appear that Black People are still treated as second-class citizens” (22).

In the course of writing this book, Spray did not just examine the fragmentary documentary evidence. He took a step further. He talked to the people – the living people – whose lives had been shaped by the content of the archives he explored. Thus, he is able to write:

Many of the young people became discouraged [with the quality of the land they received], and moved to Saint John where it was easier to find employment as servants and labourers. By the first decade of the twentieth century, more and more of the land in the settlement found its way into the hands of the White settlers in the area. A few of the lots were sold for no more than enough to buy a few bottles of rum. Today there are only a few Black families in the Willow Grove area. A few older people remember the tiny homes of the settlers and their ramshackle carts, which were used to carry brooms, berries, and other produce to market in Saint John. These people remember how poor the settlers were, and claim that they could never have hoped to better themselves by remaining in the area (37).

The last chapter of Spray's book deals with the state of New Brunswick's Black community at the time of his writing. Here we find obvious and apparent links between what was and what is. Thus we find out that "Today in schools there is no discrimination with respect to colour. However, there are still teachers who tend to spend as little time as possible in helping Black students with their work. The old problem of educated Black people being unable to find jobs suitable to their educational qualifications still exists. It is impossible to destroy prejudice and discrimination by legislation... [out] of 264 employers in industry, transportation, trade, and services in the Saint John area, 228 did not employ Blacks" (54–55). Likewise, we find out that "Many homeowners still refuse to rent to Black people. Often Blacks are told that rooms or apartments are already taken, only to find the same accommodation still advertised the next day. Other property owners who own houses in predominantly Black areas charge exorbitant rents simply because they know how difficult it is for Black people to move to other areas" (55–56). These kinds of insights, possible only because Spray went so far beyond the usual purview, lead us to a truer definition of history; layers upon layers of the past flowing through our present.

What is still happening *even though* it should have been past. Once, I heard a historian say that the problem with writing books like this is that they have a shelf life. They speak to their moment and become irrelevant. But shouldn't that be our hope – for books to do their work in the world and then fade away because they are no longer needed? Of course it is not so simple. But in this sense, the reprint of W.A. Spray's *The Blacks in New Brunswick* almost fifty years later is nothing short of a tragedy. It means that the great difficulties are as yet unsolved. So here's to STU for making available once again this great book. May it be the last time.

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