

Planters Studies Conference

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Report on conference held 23-25 October 1987 in Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

Few conferences leave a profound impression on their subject matter. An exception to this generalization was "New England Planters in Maritime Canada," a colloquium held at Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, on 23-25 October 1987. The event focused on the settlers who occupied Acadian lands following the expulsion of the original European inhabitants in 1755. Known as "Pre-Loyalists" in much of the existing historical literature, these immigrants were shown in a variety of key papers at the conference to have imprinted the Maritimes with basic values and social structures that were to endure into the nineteenth century. Rather than precursors of the refugees from the American Revolution, they were the human bedrock to which the Loyalists adhered. Recognition of the importance of the "Planters" has been forthcoming in current American historiography, but Canadian writing, dominated from outside the region, has to date ascribed little importance to them. Conference organizers believed that greater attention should be paid to the Planters and planned for a small meeting to exchange current research findings. The reaction from scholars and the general public evidenced an interest exceeding all expectations. The seminar for 25 persons became an assembly attended by over 125. Clearly careful scrutiny of Planters and Planter society was overdue. The result was a substantial amendment to the interpretation of early Maritime history.

Organizers grouped papers into themes that knitted themselves into a smoothly flowing pattern. Opening papers dealt with the research resources available for Planter Studies, including literary documentation and the

existing historiography. The Planter past was re-created in sessions on their general disposition across the landscape of Atlantic Canada and their specific areas of settlement. Culture was a major focus of attention, with sessions on religion, material history and architectural heritage. A round-table discussion examined future research initiatives to be taken, and an excursion to Kings County revealed the enduring presence of influences from these early settlers. The spiritual dynamism of Planter society was recaptured by presentation of extracts from an opera based on the life of Henry Alline and by a church service held at the Coverters' Church at Grand Pré. Finally, apt recognition was paid to Esther Clark Wright, herself a pioneer scholar of pioneers, who, still active at over 90 years of age, commands the affection of many who attended the conference. With over twenty-seven presentations, careful review of each paper is not possible here. Furthermore, the expected publication of proceedings by Acadiensis Press makes such treatment unnecessary. But readers will be interested in a sketch of aspects of material history touched upon at the conference.

Reference to material culture was made in the opening papers on research resources. Terrence Punch, a genealogist from Nova Scotia, drew a distinction between good genealogists and those who merely reconstitute a family. Good genealogists provide the context for human migrations, including the material, and search through a wide range of documents. Unfortunately he did not say which documents, a weakness that was in part redressed by Dale Cogswell from the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, who described a range of sources held by his institution that could aid the material historian. Chief among these were the probate

court records for all counties from 1784; records of the insolvent deceased, 1784–1845; and case records and judgements from the New Brunswick Supreme Court, including the Court of Equity. No mention was made of chattel mortgages, another helpful source where they exist.

A wide-ranging paper by Graeme Wynn confirmed the relevance of his own brand of cultural geography for material historians. The author of *Timber Colony: A Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth Century New Brunswick* returned to an earlier interest in describing the patterns of people on the land in eighteenth-century Nova Scotia and how the limits of local resources circumscribed the prospects of succeeding generations. Aspects of material culture, such as home styles, gravestones and technological attainments, were mentioned in defining the identities of the settlers. More importantly, some basic concerns to material historians, like house layout and domestic routines, were numbered among the issues that require further examination before the waning of Planter fortunes can be explained. The breadth of Wynn's vision is encouraging to those who seek an interpretation of the historical process that embraces a range of thematic concerns.

Wynn's overview was supplemented by two subsequent papers on Planter settlements in Horton Township, Nova Scotia, and Sackville Township in present-day New Brunswick. Debra McNabb, whose studies of Horton Township were widely cited at the conference, traced the fate of the Horton colonists whose fortunes were limited by the access they had to arable land. Successful newcomers survived slow development of vacant land, scarce labour and poor markets by incorporating marginal economic activities into their lives and adjusting cultural attitudes towards inheritance of land. James Snowdon, a material culture consultant, examined the allocation of land among Sackville settlers to show that the original intentions of community planners faltered in the face of geographical realities and entrenched cultural preferences.

A complete session on Planter material culture incorporated three papers on widely different topics. Deborah Trask of the Nova Scotia Museum furthered her already extensive treatment of gravestones by analyzing the design, origin and social significance of gravemarkers in Planter communities. She found that the actual tombstones (as opposed to the text on them) do

little to reveal the church affiliation, economic status and origins of the dead whom they commemorate. Markers are grouped together from place to place according to their source, either local or imported. Other than to indicate trade patterns in a rather specialized commodity, Trask's findings, in this context at least, limit the overall potential of tombstones as evidence for academic historians. Eric Ruff of the Yarmouth County Museum delivered a paper originally intended for presentation by his colleague, Helen Hall, on Planter culture as it is represented in the archival holdings of that museum. The treatment was comprehensive and underscored the active role the museum plays in the general community. Besides letters, inventories of estates, surveyors' field books, deeds and personal possessions of the original settlers, reference was made to a house brought to the area in 1759 and *in situ* tombstones. Given the wealth of evidence at hand, the lack of mention of an exhibit area on the topic was notable and serves perhaps to set the agenda for further exhibition development at the museum. Robert Elliott and M.A. (Jan) MacDonald from the New Brunswick Museum jointly presented the outline of a project employing material evidence to document New Brunswick's "Early Comers." Elliot dealt with the critical need to authenticate artifacts prior to their use in interpretation, and MacDonald demonstrated this validation process using objects from the museum's collections. The work described by MacDonald was part of a larger project, some of the results of which are expected to appear in these pages presently.

It was instructive to observe the reactions of the audience to the material culture session. Concentration levels perked up in many, and whispered comments could be heard throughout the room. Clearly the "artifacts people" were reaching the bulk of the general public in attendance, many of whom were older and descendants of Planters. The eyes of some of the academics, however, began to glaze over. More than a divergence of interests may explain these differing responses. In presenting their research, material historians are challenged to move beyond the first level of enquiry which Gregg Finley has described as "the analysis of the objects' scholarly potential as an historical document" to a second level in which appropriate material documents contribute to the discussion of a particular historical question in a qualitative or quantitative way.¹ Unfortunately material history can easily become overly involved with

the discovery and description of the evidence to the detriment of the interpretative analysis that gives it scholarly meaning. The exercise may thereby become "an amorphous and infinitely expandable quest for the chamber pots and sardine cans of life," as one academic commentator once bluntly put it. The papers in the material culture session rose above the first level but did not attain (or seek to attain) the point where the unique evidence of artifacts was producing original historical findings.

Indeed the next session on Planter architectural heritage tended to suggest that the effectiveness of material objects as historical evidence can be overrated. Three papers on architecture looked at the considerable built heritage left by the Planters. Heather Davidson presented a carefully considered overview of houses in Kings County in which a sample of structures was analyzed for changes over time. Distinctions were drawn between "vernacular" or a practical, somewhat eccentric, style and the "academic" or "colonial" style which reflected foreign plans, building materials and fashion. Had Davidson stopped there, her paper would have paralleled the preceding papers on material culture. To her credit, an attempt was made to offer some interpretative conclusions. In doing so Davidson fell off one of the favourite hobby-horses of this reviewer and helped to demonstrate the difficulty of rendering material evidence into historical conclusions. Claiming that homes are human documents, the speaker linked the attitude of the houses' inhabitants to the design of the structure. The low, modest, vernacular buildings were inhabited by God-fearing, vulnerable, community-minded settlers, while the more grandiose academic houses were built later as confidence and competition grew. All of this may or may not be true, but the demonstrated links between style and human character were absent, and the conclusions amounted to little more than speculative assertions. Architectural historians engage in a lot of that sort of thing. This reviewer was once treated to a lengthy confident presentation on false-fronted buildings on the Canadian Prairies as representatives of a distinctive Western-Canadian mentality. Shortly thereafter, in Newfoundland, an interest in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, led him on a brief excursion to the Charlottetown found within Terra Nova National Park. There a cluster of false-fronted buildings mimicked the emphatic expression of Western character

described in the scholarly paper. The link, therefore, between physical evidence and historical conclusions must reflect more than the viewer's projections of self onto the subject matter. Some links, such as technological sophistication and manual dexterity, are easier to establish than others like individual values and communal attitudes. Ironically the search for these connections may lead the researcher back to traditional historical evidence.

It did for Allen Penny who delivered a detailed review of the home of Simeon Perkins in Liverpool. Changes in the exterior and interior were carefully traced with the use of Perkins' diary. Penny found that some alterations had been obscured by subsequent modifications and that physical as well as written evidence was needed to complete the picture. Similarly Daniel Norris, in an effective comparison of four houses with the house of Samuel Loomer in Canning, showed that complete interpretation of the structures required the use of legal records.

Thus "New England Planters in Maritime Canada" did more than resurrect a fundamental element in eighteenth-century Maritime society. For material historians it heralded, through the substantial contribution the field made to the total conference, the recognition that material culture studies have much to offer. At the same time, however, it helped to define the effectiveness of material evidence in general, denying it the unfettered ability to sustain historical conclusions without the aid of archival documentation. Giving an artifact the stature of a map or a photograph as a piece of historical evidence is no insult to the museum object, but it fails to meet the assertions of some curators that artifact collections fill the void left by the absence of data in archival holdings.² Certainly it is up to material historians, if we wish to claim more, to prove our case.

NOTES

1. Gregg Finley, "Material History and Curatorship: Problems and Prospects." Paper presented to the Canadian Museums Association Annual Meeting, Toronto, 23 May 1985, pp. 13-14.
2. These claims must also respond to the criticisms of museum holdings outlined in D.R. Richeson, "Museum Collections, Distortions of Our Past?" *Ontario Museums Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Winter, 1983): 18-22.