

# **“WHY NEW BRUNSWICK NEEDS CHARLOTTE TAYLOR: THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL FICTION IN IDENTITY FORMATION”**

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In asking questions like “Where does story start?” and “Where does the voice come from?,” Canadian humanists have been following the lead of New Brunswick-born critic Malcolm Ross. Ross concluded in 1976 that much “scholarly labour remains to be done” (p. 175) in order to free our studies from topocentrism (that dominant preoccupation with geography) and situate those studies in the matrices of time. Ross was saying clearly that history not only matters but must also figure integrally in our attempts to know ourselves as human subjects.

And so to understand English New Brunswick’s appalling lack of resources for self-examination — we have no provincial encyclopedia, no contemporary history, no talk radio, no independent press, no public-school *provincial* curriculum, no indigenous film, and virtually no historical fiction — it is worth a turn to history to investigate original conditions.

Scholars who have taken that turn understand that though intersected by the competing tensions of British/French and American fealty, New Brunswick was more classically republican than monarchically conservative during its formative pre-Confederation years. Trade and exchange patterns moved north-south, not east-west, the result being that we had far more in common with New England, whose borders we shared, than with Ontario, whose borders were mostly out of reach before the Intercolonial Railway. That north-south familiarity, of course, has been erased by the powerful persuasions of post-Confederation federalism, which imagined a ubiquitous narrative of pro-British loyalism for the formerly seaboard province.

Neither affiliation, however, did anything to encourage self-understanding in New Brunswick. Federalism’s persuasions were powerfully centralist, creating the deep-rooted insecurities and inequities that Ian McKay and Donald Savoie have identified in their work. Federalism’s new centres required the parallel construction of margins and dependencies, which were normalized in New Brunswick by stories and editorials describing failure, lethargy, and structural malaise.

The contemporary critics of note in theorizing this centre/margin co-dependency are cultural geographers like Neil Smith; however, Maritime historians reached similar conclusions much earlier. E.R. Forbes observed that “if the frontier encouraged progressive, egalitarian and democratic attitudes, then that part of the country furthest removed from the frontier stage [the Maritimes] must be conservative,

socially stratified and unprogressive” (p. 51). Historian Margaret Conrad agreed, citing as her favourite example of the maintenance of this centre/margin thinking Barry Cooper’s “western” argument that “[the Maritimes’] stagnation and decadence remain the most prominent features of pre-modern communal life to have survived into the present” (p. 3). The view that New Brunswick is a place of “stagnation” is further abetted by the fact that crown corporations, publishing centres, the national media, the country’s economic engine, and its centres of legislative power are elsewhere. And so, by logic, should be the focus of our attentions. Only provincials, to extend that logic, would seek to understand absence.

The truth is, though, that our republican pre-Confederation affiliations have not served us any better in encouraging self-understanding. As late as 1931, Robert Frost was still lamenting a New England Puritan bias that continues to inform our provincial ethos. Frost recalls “a minister who turned his daughter — his poetry-writing daughter — out on the street to earn a living, because he said there should be no more books written; God wrote one book, and that was enough” (p. 33). Mrs. Frances Bevan, New Brunswick’s first literary chronicler, had written much the same thing in warning her neighbours against “[the] novel as the climax of human wickedness” (p. 108).

If the pursuit of introspective understanding is scarce in English New Brunswick, then, the foregoing should explain why. In the face of this condition the reasonable question must be, *what can we, as intellectual workers, do to correct it?*

One strategy is to become as focused as Acadians and Newfoundlanders. Both looked inward to histories, ethnicities, and language as the raw materials from which to build a social renaissance, and, in the process, correct the myths of “stagnation and decadence” that have so long prevailed about the region. Neither was deterred by accusations of parochialism because both recognized that charge as an ideological parry to the centre-margin myths they were challenging.

## CHARLOTTE TAYLOR

In English New Brunswick, where much cultural work needs to be done to match what our neighbours have achieved, a place to start is with Sally Armstrong’s pioneering work of historical fiction, *The Nine Lives of Charlotte Taylor* (2007). The first novel of the globe-trotting internationally respected human rights advocate, it would seem an odd choice for a beginning, except that its very incubation marks the kind of purposeful trajectory that all inhabitants of the margins, whether people or communities, must take: that is, a return to origins in the service of self-knowledge. Armstrong wrote *The Nine Lives of Charlotte Taylor* at the behest of just such an impulse, specifically, from a desire to understand her own history in the figure of her great, great, great grandmother Charlotte Taylor, who arrived in New Brunswick in 1775 and spent the next sixty-six years as a witness to history.

What Charlotte Taylor observes is nothing less than the tensions and negotiations of our origins: everything from the emergence of our resource economy and the often-violent rise of borders to the ways that colonial wars separated winners and losers and how settlers became oriented to First Nations perspectives. Charlotte's New Brunswick is a tableau of peoples adapting European ideas to suit a New World. It provides insight into the provenance of our values of resiliency, self-reliance, and thrift. And, most importantly, it benchmarks a beginning, opening space for complementary and competing stories of genesis. As all storytellers know, voice is organic in not only uniting people but also in imagining their communities into existence.

Historical fiction of this sort is essential and emancipatory because it situates us and arms us with countervailing myths. Without stories of origin and myths of purpose we are doomed to live inside the narratives of people more powerful than we are, whether the outlaw gunslingers of Fox News or those in our own country whose positions are advanced by denigrating us. God knows there are many myths and stories that others are eager for us to adopt, hoping that we will ignore our own in the process.

In an effort to suppress self-understanding, cultural mandarins from away accuse us of being provincial or, worse, parochial. They endeavour to train us to think of ourselves as small, insignificant, and marginal, the consequence of which makes New Brunswickers feel lost and disenfranchised. New Brunswickers love their province, but they are bombarded with reasons why it is second-class, a backwater, home to the country's highest rates of obesity, the lowest literacy scores, and a soaring fiscal deficit. In the absence of strong, defining myths and stories of their own place, they know only about the negatives.

Which is why *The Nine Lives of Charlotte Taylor* is so important.

The irrepressible Charlotte is a prototype for our own made-in-New Brunswick myth. She is our Anne of Green Gables – except she is tougher, more worldly, and full of the values of a resilient and stubborn strength that continue to define us. Intrepid and self-assured, she is the model for living side by side with others in a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual universe.

If the emergence of an Acadian consciousness was built on the myth of Pélégie, the matriarch who brings her people home, we can do as well in English New Brunswick by embracing Charlotte, whose grit in the face of impossible odds is as affirming as the spunk of PEI's Anne. Our heroines are not saucy and cute; they are coarse and fearless, outspoken and decisive. At a time when there is increasing pressure for us to become more self-reliant, there are no better models to follow to rediscover our fitness to face the future. As E.R. Forbes so insightfully stated, "without an understanding of the past, individuals, communities, and institutions are in no position to identify, much less defend, their true interests" (p. 12).

In refusing to be a bit player in the dramas of others, in risking life and limb in the New World to be the author of her own story, and therefore destiny, Charlotte Taylor is just the role model we need to help us navigate the future.

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